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# The Stele and the Other Statues A Stone Puzzle from Surkh Kotal

by LUCA M. OLIVIERI, FABRIZIO SINISI

Encore une fois : revenir à la fouille.  
Je revois cent détails mais rien ne bouge plus.  
Il faut donc en décrire les acteurs, immobiles à table,  
le soir, dans la grande tente où l'on dînait :  
Le professeur tient le haut bout [...]

Nicolas Bouvier, *L'usage du monde*. In *Oeuvres*, Paris 2004, p. 379<sup>1</sup>

L'articolo nasce dallo studio archeologico e iconografico della stele in pietra raffigurante un sovrano seduto su trono dal sito di Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, pubblicata da Daniel Schlumberger nel rapporto finale sul sito del 1983 e discussa lo stesso anno in un articolo di Giovanni Verardi su *East and West*. La stele fu rinvenuta in pessime condizioni sulla terrazza sommitale del sito, all'estremità nord della fronte della corte. All'estremità opposta furono trovate parti delle tre famose statue di re kushana oggi al Museo di Kabul. La prima parte dell'articolo presenta alcune integrazioni alle letture della stele proposte nel passato. Alla luce di un riesame dei dati pubblicati, si avanza l'ipotesi che i luoghi di ritrovamento della stele e delle statue fossero secondari, e che in origine queste ultime fossero collocate altrove nella terrazza sommitale del santuario. La seconda parte dell'articolo propone, sulla base dei dettagli iconografici, un'ipotesi sull'identificazione dei sovrani rappresentati nella stele e nelle statue e una nuova ricostruzione degli eventi connessi sia alla fondazione che alle fasi ricostruttive e finali del grande santuario.

## PREAMBLE

The story of this study is short. In the aftermath of the 24<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Association of South Asian Art and Archaeology held in Naples in July 2018, we started discussing the implications of the paper one of us (Fabrizio Sinisi) had presented at the conference. We agreed that these implications, wherever they ended, had to engage the

<sup>1</sup> We thank Maria Teresa Giaveri for the citation. She has recently published a new Italian translation of Bouvier's travelogue (*La polvere del mondo*, Milano 2020). The last chapter of this book (in Italian: "Il Castello dei Pagani") contains a vivid description of the fieldwork at Surkh Kotal where Bouvier, *en route* to Kabul and the Khyber Pass, halted for some days in November 1954 (III campaign; SKr: 8).

Daniel Schlumberger, Director of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan (1945-1964), directed the excavations at Surkh Kotal from 1952 to 1963. His "Descendants non-méditerranéens de l'art grec" (1960) still represent for us, as it did during our University courses at 'La Sapienza' University of Rome, a stimulating challenge. Therefore, we would like to dedicate this study to Daniel Schlumberger on the eve of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his demise (1972), and of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of fieldwork at Surkh Kotal.

ideas that were—maybe prematurely—presented by Daniel Schlumberger in his study on the “Descendants non-méditerranéens de l’art grec” (1960). In the 60 years following Schlumberger’s work, many great discoveries occurred in the art and archaeology of the territories between the Near East and India, but very few evidences emerged to support his thesis.<sup>2</sup>

It was actually from a recent re-reading of an article by Giovanni Verardi that Luca M. Olivieri, in early 2020 decided to turn his attention to an important but extremely complex sculpture from Surkh Kotal, a stele (or slab) in a condition that prevented further study after its publication in 1983. After some time, having reached the impasse that marks the dead-end of any study, he shared his views with Fabrizio Sinisi, and we thought of merging our views in a note for the new series of the journal *East and West*.

While each of us focussed on the area[s] he is more familiar with, we did exchange views while writing. Yet, we opted for two distinct sections, which are to a large extent independent of each other, with no relation to their sequence. In both instances we have advanced hypotheses aimed primarily at stimulating discussion on one of the most important Kushan sites.

## PART 1—THE STELE, THE STONE STATUES, AND THEIR CONTEXT

### *The Site*

The excavated sanctuary at Surkh Kotal is situated in the Baghlan province of Afghanistan (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The importance of this province does not need to be restated here. The area, whose modern name may derive from *bagolango* (‘temple’) (see Henning 1956), was probably at the core of the Kushan lands. Besides the evidence of two nearby sanctuaries founded by Kanishka (at Rabatak or its surroundings, and at Surkh Khotal), one should add the Sasanian celebratory rock relief at Rag-e Bibi (Grenet et al. 2007; see also Levine, Plekhov 2019). Figuratively, in a single day of driving, one can visit the hill of Rabatak (Robatak), and proceeding South along the same route/valley, reach Surkh Kotal and finally Rag-e Bibi.

Surkh Kotal lies along an important route, which comes from Kapisa, crosses the Pol-e Khomri plain, and leads to Kunduz (the Bactrian Aornos? See recently Rapin 2017a; 2017b). The region is possibly the same mentioned in the inscription of Rabatak as “the plain of Kasig” (Falk 2015a: § 096, line 8). In the region there was a major town: I found convincing the suggestions by C. Rapin (2017a; 2017b) that Arrian’s Drapsaka or Drepsa, or Lraf in the foundation inscription of Surkh Kotal (SK 4, line 4 = Falk 2015a: §107), was in the surroundings of Baghlan.<sup>4</sup>

The excavation at Surkh Kotal was a colossal enterprise for those years. It was excavated in very hard conditions and with very limited funds (Fussman 2015: 182). The

<sup>2</sup> On the legacy of D. Schlumberger, see e.g. the various contributions in Leriche 2014. I would like to thank here G. Fussman and P. Callieri for their important insights and comments.

<sup>3</sup> A very important synthesis can be found in Fussman 2017. Perhaps the first modern notice of Rabatak hilltop is in Fischer 1969: 351. For the topography of the area see Adamec 1972: pls. I-10-C, I-10-D, I-17 B.

<sup>4</sup> According to SK 4 (Falk 2015a: 122), following a “threat” and the temporary abandonment of the sanctuary of Surkh Kotal, in the early times of Huvishka “the [displaced] gods were taken” to the “stronghold” of Lraf.



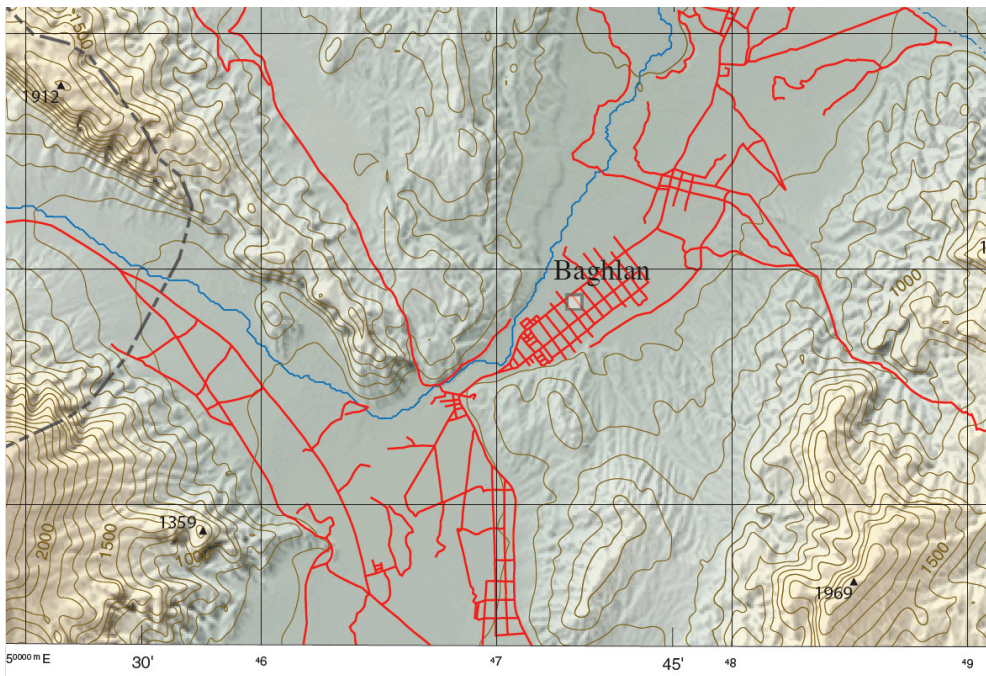


Fig. 1a - Map of the area of Surkh Kotal (located slightly E of point 1359 asl; after USG /AGS open files; compiled by R.G. Bohannon, 2005; quadrangles 3768-3668).

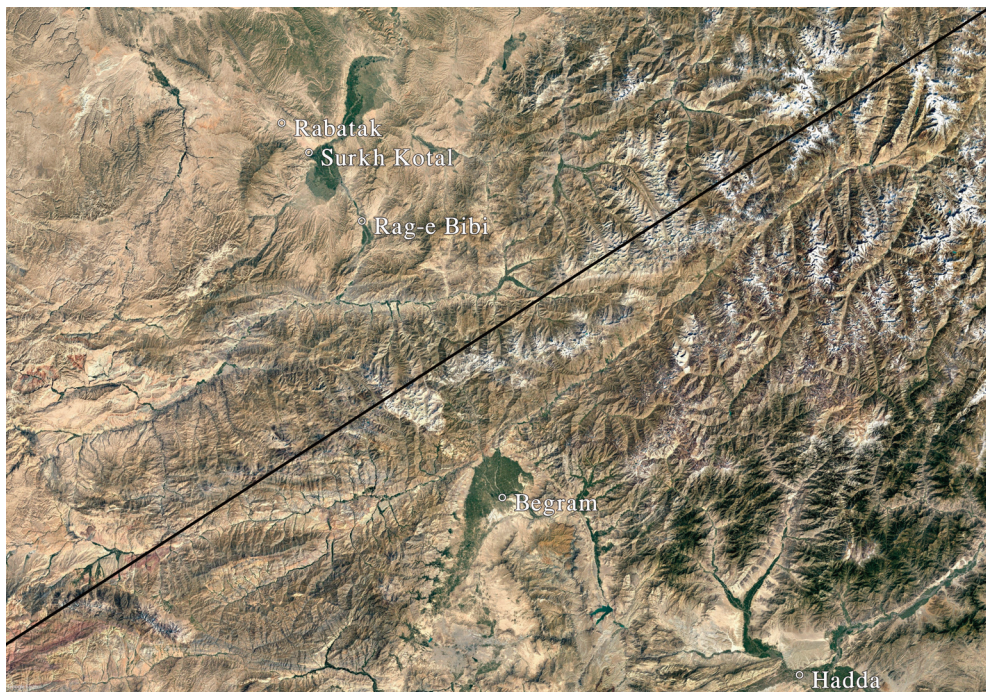


Fig. 1b - The great divide of the Hindukush: the position of the three sites in Baghlan vis-à-vis Begram and Hadda. © GoogleEarth.



results, however, were of paramount importance. The site is one of the most important ones in Asia; so far, the most important one for the Kushan history.

For the description the stele, the stone statues, the structures of the sanctuary at Surkh Kotal, and of the annexed structure, we refer to the final report edited by G. Fussman (Schlumberger et al. 1983, abbreviated as SKr).

## *The Stele*

### The Discovery

The so-called stele of Surkh Kotal (actually, a slab) is an impressive bas-relief, depicting a seated man larger than life-size, found on the top slopes immediately below the upper plateau of the site (Figs. 2-4): “En un point de cette enceinte une dalle de calcaire [...] émergeait du sol” (Schlumberger 1952a: 226). After the excavations it was found that the very spot where the stele emerged was the NE corner of the *peribolos* around

the Temple A on the top terrace of the sanctuary. According to the description, the stele should have been horizontal at the moment of its discovery, although the image reproduced in Fig. 5 (Rosenfield 1967: fig. 118) gives a different impression (this detail, if known, would be of some importance).



Fig. 2 - The stele. After SKr: pl. 65.

Lors de notre première visite à la colline, en décembre 1951 (*CRAI*, 1952, p. 226 [= Schlumberger 1952a]), elle était visible en grande partie, et sa surface couverte de lichens montrait qu'elle était longtemps restée exposée aux intempéries. Elle émergeait des décombres de l'enceinte du péribole [...], au sommet de la colline, tout auprès de son rebord, d'où il eût suffi d'un léger progrès du ruissellement pour la faire glisser sur le versant. (SKr: 122).

In 1983 this Journal published a contribution which since then has acquired a well-deserved reputation. Giovanni Verardi's “Kuşāṇa Emperors as Cakravartins...” (1983), a superb analysis of the self-perception

of the Kushan power, contains a brief analysis of the stele.

As far as we know, the only description of this stele after its discovery consisted of a few lines by J.M. Rosenfield (1967: 157), who follows the first excavation reports by Schlumberger (1952a; 1952b; 1954), and two more elaborate texts, both published in

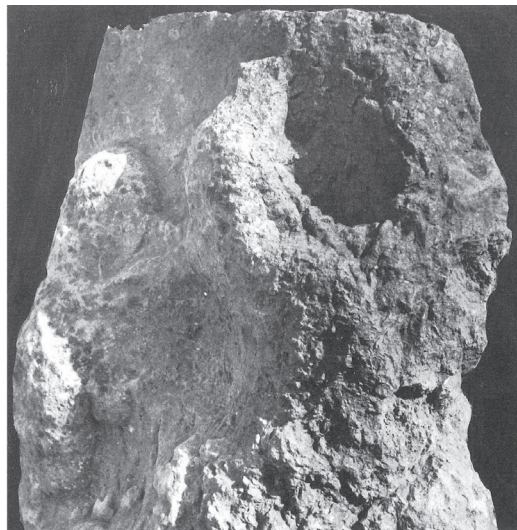
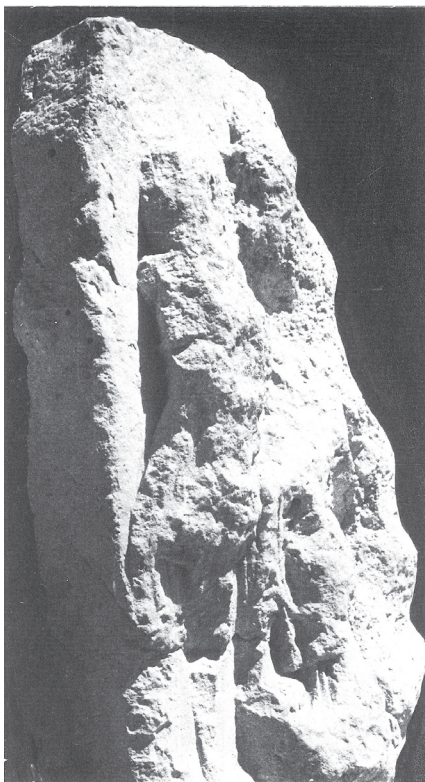


Fig. 3 - The stele. After SKr: pl. 65.204-205.

1983: two pages [by D. Schlumberger] in SKr, and three pages by Verardi in the cited article. Lastly, Frantz Grenet dedicated a paragraph to the stele in one recent article on “Zoroastrianism among the Kushans” (Grenet 2015: 229).

In theory, the stele should still be at the same spot (“Laissée sur place”; SKr: 122). We doubt that anyone would have dared to move it or to further deface it, since its impaired condition would be the first deterrent to that. The most recent information we could trace was a photograph by Nino Cirani, a famous Italian traveller, probably during his trip to Afghanistan in 1975 (Fig. 4). This photograph clearly shows the stele, lying on the ground (apparently not far from its find-spot), and raised on a few stones, to keep it horizontal, was broken along the lower right corner; the two pieces were still connected when the picture was taken. However, there is no memory of the stele in the visit made at the site by Giovanni Verardi in early 2000s (pers. comm.). Neither there is mention of the stele in the *carnet de route* by R. Besenval and J.-F. Jarrige. The two scholars visited Surkh Kotal in late spring-early summer 2002 (Besenval, Jarrige, Bernard 2002: 1415-1417).

To sum up, all the available information on the stele has to be necessarily extracted from three photographs taken in the 1950s (published in SKr: pl. 65 = Figs. 2-3), the picture reproduced by J.M. Rosenfield (1967: fig. 118 = Fig. 5), and finally the picture by N. Cirani mentioned above (Fig. 4).

### The Object

The stele in itself is simply a rectangular irregular slab of stone, broken on the upper part of the right side (as seen by the viewer), complete on the top, bottom and left sides.





Fig. 4 - The stele. Photo N. Cirani; De Agostini/agefotostock.

From this, we can assume that its dimensions are fairly close to the original piece. The stone is “un calcaire de mauvais qualité dont la provenance n’est pas connue” (Fussman in SKr: 86). From the kind of porosity, texture, and form of decay, one can expect a sort of dolomite.<sup>5</sup>

The slab is sculpted on the front face, while the rear is left roughly dressed. Three side edges of the slab are finished and flat, as they possibly were respectively the vertical and horizontal rebates meant to join the jamb and the cornice of the frame in which the stele might have been originally inserted. The lower edge of the stele shows a rough and possibly unfinished treatment of the surface, as it was meant not to be visible. On the surface Schlumberger noted the presence of “des trous de mortier, aménagés dans la dalle après sa mise hors d’usage, et qui ont encore contribué à la défigurer” (SKr: 122).

<sup>5</sup> According to USG/AGS Geological Map 3768-3668, sheets 215-216, 221-222 the hill of Surkh Kotal is formed by sandstone and siltstone (Late Cretaceous = K<sub>2</sub>ssl): sandstone, siltstone more abundant than clay, limestone, marl, conglomerate, gypsum. The hill is surrounded by deposits of dolomite. As conservators know well, weathering of dolomite can be extremely rapid. I would like to cite here a really wonderful work done on the weathering damages in another delicate environment, Nemrud Dağ, where the majority of the stelae and reliefs left at the site in the open are in sandstone and limestone (Heinrichs, Fitzner 2007).



The slab's measurements are the following: 2.2 height, 1.51 width, 0.65 thickness. The thickness of the back slab is *c.* 0.25-0.30 max., while the most projecting part of the sculpture (the centre-upper left) protrudes 0.35 max. (SKr: 122) [measurements are always given in metres].<sup>6</sup>

### *The Figures*

#### What Was Seen

Verardi (1983: 242) writes:

Only an iconographic detail seems to link the images at the two sites [Mathura and Surkh Kotal]: at Māt Vima Kadphises [→ Taktu] is seated in *pralambādāsana* on a *simhāsana*; at Surkh Kotal a

stele was found where a king is also seated on a throne (Schlumberger, Le Berre, Fussman 1983: [p]l. 65), itself most probably a *simhāsana*. Are then the two places really to be considered connected from an ideological point of view? I think so, and it is this stele, so badly worn-out that even a good photograph cannot be of any help, that will permit us to explain the connection between the two sites (see *infra*: 272 ff.).



Fig. 5 - The stele. After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 118.

<sup>6</sup> In this section I deliberately avoid elaborating on art history matters. However, to introduce the reader to my point of view, the following considerations should be sufficient. In the busy and crowded *fabrica* of Surkh Kotal, the authorities in charge of the construction starting, from the second quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, were able to gather the best working forces available throughout the then Kushan-controlled territories. There were sculptors from Bactria specialised in limestone carvings such as hypothetically, the team that was working on the upper frieze (the “bulls”) of Temple A, where the consistency of proportion and treatment suggests the presence of a single workshop. Amongst these sculptors there were others whose Graeco-Bactrian roots are more evident, for example those who were working on the Attic bases and on some of the Corinthian capitals with more defined Hellenistic features (longer and separated volutes; e.g. Tissot 2003: 56, nos. 113-116). Other sculptors were busy in clay modelling, and these were probably from across upper Bactria, where this art had been in fashion for centuries. The artists working on the podia of both the “Buddhist platform” and Temple A depended immensely on the Gandharan repertoire (vine scrolls, rosettes and lattices, lozenges, etc.) (on a later chronology of the platform see Fussman 2015: 182-183). On the same walls a different team was probably working on the pilasters, moulding and masonry, whose neatness and clarity of lines is remarkable. It is possible that amongst the team working on the capitals, on top and on the plain, there were also artists from Swat. The miniature treatment of the eyes and nose, hair and hands of the tiny figurines from the Buddhist sites around Barikot (see Brancaccio, Olivieri 2019) is extremely close to some of the figures stemming out of the acanthus tufts of the capitals of the podia at Surkh Kotal. Other individual artists from the same environment were also employed. I am considering, for example, the metope with dancer snapping his fingers from one of the merlons of Temple A (Lo Muzio 2019: 80), which finds interesting comparisons in Swat. Those who sculpted the three big statues-stelae belong to the same tradition, but not to the same workshop. Apparently, there is nothing ‘Gandharic’ in these sculptures, although similar conventions (spread boots, caftan) are followed by Gandharan artists when representing ‘Kushan characters.’ But in the statues of Surkh Kotal, as in the statue(s) from Mathura, these details are over-represented and unnatural. This can be interpreted as a sign that the artists were uneasy with an imposed subject (see Part 2 by Sinisi, below). Notwithstanding the probably local (Gandharan? Bactrian?) handwork, for the iconography of the stele with the enthroned figure, notwithstanding its utilisation at Mathura, we have to look for its background in West Asia (see below).

The starting words of Verardi's paragraph titled 'The *cakravartin* stele from Surkh Kotal' (*ibid.*: 272-275) are very promising indeed ("The most interesting sculpture that has come to light at Surkh Kotal [...]"), but any hope of the reader is quickly demolished ("[...] is a very badly eroded stele [...]. The photographs are not of much help, the piece being what it is") (*ibid.*: 272).

Daniel Schlumberger's description of the piece also contains a similar warning: "Le relief est atrocement mutilé. [...] De la sculpture, il ne reste guère que des volumes informes, échappant à toute description, parmi lesquels subsistent isolément quelques détails clairs" (SKr: 122).<sup>7</sup>

Let us, then, place the major points of the two descriptions together in a synoptic chart.

Schlumberger, in SKr: 122-123

Verardi 1983: 272-275

PERSONNAGE TRÔNANT

la **tête**, coiffée d'un sorte de **tiare** ou mortier présentant à la **base**, sur chaque côté, une **protubérance latérale** ; le contour des épaules, sur lesquelles la **chevelure** tombe en de **longues tresses**, et d'où jaillissent des **flammes**, visibles surtout sur l'épaule gauche [à droite], mais incontestables même sur l'autre épaule ; dans le bas, des restes des **draperies enveloppant les pieds** et laissant notamment deviner le **pied droit**.

MALE ROYAL FIGURE SEATED ON A THRONE

who wore a **tiara** and had **long hair** falling on the shoulders. From these, **flames** arose that are especially visible on the left shoulder, and can be detected also on the right one.

TRÔNE

on distingue un **pied**, en **forme de patte de félin**, placé sur un **socle** très saillant, sur lequel pose aussi le pied du personnage

SIMHĀSANA THRONE

Of the throne only a **foot** can be seen, in the **form of a feline paw** resting on the same **socle** on which are the feet of the royal figure.

« OBJET »

un **volumineux objet fortement saillant** un **pieu de piquet** très clairement reconnaissable **la masse arrondie du sommet** serait le reste non pas d'une tête, mais d'un **casque** ; **deux** mystérieuse **lanières** tombant verticalement que l'on voit dans le bas de l'« objet » seraient **les lambrequins d'une cuirasse** ; et le **pieu** serait **le support du trophée**. Le sommet arrondi de l'« objet » [...] rappelle les hauts de certains **dossiers de trône** [...] Le corps même de l'« objet » [...] Malgré sa forte saillie et sa ligne légèrement incurvée suggèrent l'aspect d'un corps humain [...] une **petite victoire** posée sur le bras du trône ou sur la main du personnage principal.

ELONGATED OBJECT

indistinguishable [...] **roundish on top**

I would think rather of a **fire-altar** [...]

<sup>7</sup> The description "a été rédigée pour l'essentiel par" D. Schlumberger (SKr: 107, fn.\*).

## Some Additions (Figs. 5-6)

With the exception of the enthroned figure—Schlumberger said—“[t]out le reste me laisse perplexe, et je dois me résoudre à décrire ce que je ne comprends pas, avec l’espoir que cette description et surtout nos photographies suggéreront au lecteur des perspectives que je n’ai pas su entrevoir” (SKr: 122).

With reference to the “objet” on the left side, both Schlumberger and Verardi in their analysis accept that it may be identified as “un corps humain” (“another human figure”), but that such hypothesis is weakened by the absence of the legs (“c’est en vain que l’on cherche les jambes que l’on attendrait;” “but no traces of legs or feet are found in its lower part”).

This is the first point where we may dare to augment the Schlumberger’s opinion (who, amongst those who described the stele, remains the only one to have seen and touched the stele). It is possible that the lower part of the “objet,” whatever it showed, was greatly shortened. I could not clearly detect those “deux mystérieuses lanières” (unless Schlumberger was alluding to a series of parallel rounded cylinders and stripes barely visible between the personage and the “objet”). However, below, where a kind of stake has been seen, there are some vertical marks. To me they look as working traces and tool-marks, suggesting that the slab was either unfinished or, most probably, re-worked. The working traces feature a series of two (or three) vertical stepped cuts executed at the bottom left side, which were refined by a series of parallel horizontal cuts. The tool-marks on the sides may belong to two different flat-chisels *c.* 0.10 m width (the vertical cuts) and > 0.05 m width (the horizontal finishing). Other possible tool-marks are visible on the surface of the back slab on the left and bottom-right sides (< 0.05 m width).



Fig. 6a - Cult relief of Zeus Kyrios-Baalshamin; Yale University Art Gallery, 1935.45. Yale University Art Gallery - <http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/6833>; Public Domain.



Fig. 6b - Head of Parthian personage from Qal'e-ye Now, Fars. National Archaeological Museum, Teheran, photo M. Compareti.



There is still something that can be added. At the centre of the “objet” there are several marks featuring a series of parallel rounded cylinders, and vertical strings of roundels or beads. If the impression is correct, some of the latter might actually be either long curled hair or braids, or—better—a long beaded-necklace.<sup>8</sup> Although one should leave open the possibility that these “rounded” surfaces resulted from erosion, I am inclined to dismiss the possibility, because the rest of the eroded surface—as typical in weathered limestone—is un-patterned.<sup>9</sup> The “roundish” top of the “objet” (the head of a figure?) looks like it had an elaborated headdress. The “objet,” or possibly, the “figure,” is clearly facing right (see SKr: fig. 65.204 in Fig. 2).

The tiara of the enthroned personage looks like it was also elaborated. From this there are ‘locks’ descending on the shoulder of the personage, which were interpreted as “longues tresses,” and now as ribbed ribbons of the tiara (see Part 2 by Sinisi on that). The other element which, in my view, is evident is that the head of the enthroned personage is represented in three-quarter view. The personage has possibly a long beard and certainly a rounded moustache, his nose-line is marked, and the left eye is clearly visible: open, with half-lowered upper eyelid, and the pupil treated in a way that suggest the use of a drill.<sup>10</sup> In fact one can detect, through the scarce volumetric details, that the design of the eye is somehow elegant. One can only imagine the potential beauty of the stele in its original condition. The lower part of the face and the upper bust of the personage are obliterated by one of these deep cavities, possibly “des trous de mortier” (SKr: 122).

If these details were confirmed (*if*), we might “see” a standing (female?) figure in profile, with a (decorated) headdress, facing right towards a (proportionally larger) enthroned figure (and presenting an object to the sitting personage? See fn. 9).

Instead, Schlumberger hypothesized a smaller ‘standing female figure in profile’ as “une Victoire aux dimensions de statuette” (SKr: 123) could be the “Śrī bactrienne” hypothesised by Fussman as the central deity of the sanctuary: “L’interprétation que D. Schlumberger a donnée de la stèle [...] (p. 123), vient donc tout à fait à l’appui de ma thèse” (SKr: 152). The centrality of the female deity Nana in the Kushan royal legitimacy as revealed by the inscription of Rabatak (Falk 2015a: §096, 113: lines 2 and 9), would leave here some space for further speculation (see in particular Falk 2015b). F. Grenet (2015) has recently advanced the hypothesis that “the smaller figure [...] could be a Nike, i.e. Wanind” (*ibid.*: 229), in that possibly supported by a new Bactrian inscription (referring to Surkh Kotal?) published by N. Sims-Williams (2015).

Had the stele been in better condition, it would undoubtedly have found a special place among the illustrations of Schlumberger’s “Descendants non-méditerranéens de l’art grec” (1960), and in the subsequent *Orient Hellénisé* (1970), since its scheme and

<sup>8</sup> Compare these with the vertical double row of pearls in both Statue I and II at Surkh Kotal (SKr: pls. 59-60).

<sup>9</sup> Again, compare with the bottom of Statue I (*ibid.*). A side note: I cannot avoid the impression (possibly wrong) that the right arm of the standing figure is adorned with a reeled bracelet, and he/she is holding an object presented to the sitting personage.

<sup>10</sup> For “longues tresses” in Kushana characters (depicted bareheaded though), cf. a step-riser from the Royal Ontario Museum (939.17.19). That there was a beard is beyond doubt, if one sees the images published in SKr. The photo taken by N. Cirani (Fig. 4) which shows better the large cavity damage (one of the “trous de mortier”) on the upper bust, still shows the volumes of the beard. A last note: the photograph published by Rosenfield (1967: fig. 118) might even give the illusion that the entire enthroned figure (not only the head) is portrayed in a three-quarter view to its right, which, however, seems unlikely. One is left to wonder if a detailed 3D documentation of the stele could be of help for this and other problems. On the “feline paw” of the throne see also a relief from Sikri discussed in Srinivasan 2021 (fig. 28).

visual background was largely developed in West Asia (Schlumberger 1960: 278, fn. 3; Rosenfield 1967: 183-186). The best and more celebrated antecedent is certainly the stele of Zeus-Oromasdes from Nemrud Dağ (Schlumberger 1960: fig. 1), but also the later stele with enthroned Zeus from the temple of Zeus Kyrios/Baalshamin, dated c. 31 CE (Fig. 6a; Schlumberger 1960: pl. XIII.1), and other examples (see also the final comment of Schlumberger in SKr: 123).

However, in all these examples the hierarchy of the scene is opposite to the one represented in our stele: the gods are always seated, the kings stand at their right. Instead, representation of kings enthroned, sometimes with the god or goddess standing to their right, besides earlier examples, is well developed in the Parthian world, from the relief of Artabanus IV at Susa to the Arsacid tetradrachms, and gained space in early Kushan environment at Khalchayan (see Part 2 by Sinisi, below; see also Sinisi 2020; Mode 2013).

One last point deals with the position and treatment of the head of the stele. The best formal comparison I could find is the head of a personage from Qal'eh-ye Now, Fars (Fig. 6b), previously considered Parthian, now dated to early Sasanian times (Callieri forthcoming).<sup>11</sup>

### *The Position of the Stele and of the Statues*

#### What Has Been Stated

Besides the stele, three large statue-steles (henceforth: statues) were discovered at the site (Fig. 7). These are now in the National Museum in Kabul (Tissot 2003: 52, nos. 100-102).<sup>12</sup> These were originally left at the same location as the stele but, unlike

<sup>11</sup> On which, by the way, one can recognise the use of drill.

<sup>12</sup> Statue I: 1.22 max. height, 0.63 width, 0.4 thickness; Statue II: 1.33 max. height, 0.985 width, 0.43 thickness; Statue III: 0.92 max. height, 0.85 width, 0.6 thickness. Measures in meters.

In 1985 Domenico Faccenna published the lower part of an almost life-size schist stele (reconstructed height of the figure: < 1.60 m). The object was acquired by the authorities together with a fragmentary head in schist with conical hat, at Haji Banda, located to the S of Tahkal (University Town), and to the W of the old city (Errington 1987). The stele is preserved in the Sub-Regional Office collection of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar (former SRO, Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums) under accession no. 434 (former no. 936). The stele portrays a Kushan dignitary, whose name, Miramarega, is inscribed in Kharoṣṭhī at the base (Faccenna 1985: 97; CKI 325; “servant of Mithra?” See also Fussman 2015: 173-174 and 1994: 39). The term *-marega* is preserved in two names in the inscriptions of the two reliquaries from Wardak (CKI 159 and CKI 509) both dated to 178 CE. The back side of the stele is plain with tool-marks. The stele [max. height: > 0.65 m] is broken below the knee of the figure [max. height of the figure: > 0.40 m]. “The trousers may be loose-fitting, tight, smooth or decorated with vertical stripes down the centre, now attached above the footwear, now tucked into it. The footwear consists either of shoes, or low or tall boots. The well-known relief of the Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto [cited above in fn. 10] contains a good exemplification of this. The figure depicted on our stele can thus be completed with a tunic belted around the waist, perhaps worn under a long-sleeved kaftan and with a conical hat, if the head [0.29 m max. height] found together with the stele and included on the list actually belong to it.” (*Ibid.*: 96). The head with the conical hat (accession no. 622; former no. 937) matches the stele in material and size, although the conditions of the stele are worse than the head fragment. Based on the surface treatment and the quality of the material, it would seem, at first glance, that the two pieces belong to two different statues. The head portrays a beardless (young?) man, whose naturalistic treatment is revealed by the heavy eyes (as heavy as those of similar heads from Mathura) and forehead wrinkles (for other pieces see Verardi 1984). For the purposes of complete documentation, thanks to the courtesy of Dr. Abdul Samad, Director DOAM KP, Prof. Zarawar Khan and Dr. Zawad Khan (authors of the photographs), new pictures of these otherwise difficultly accessible pieces are reproduced at the end of this section (Figs. 12a-b).



Fig. 7a - A view of the terraced sanctuary. After SKr: pl. 5.11.

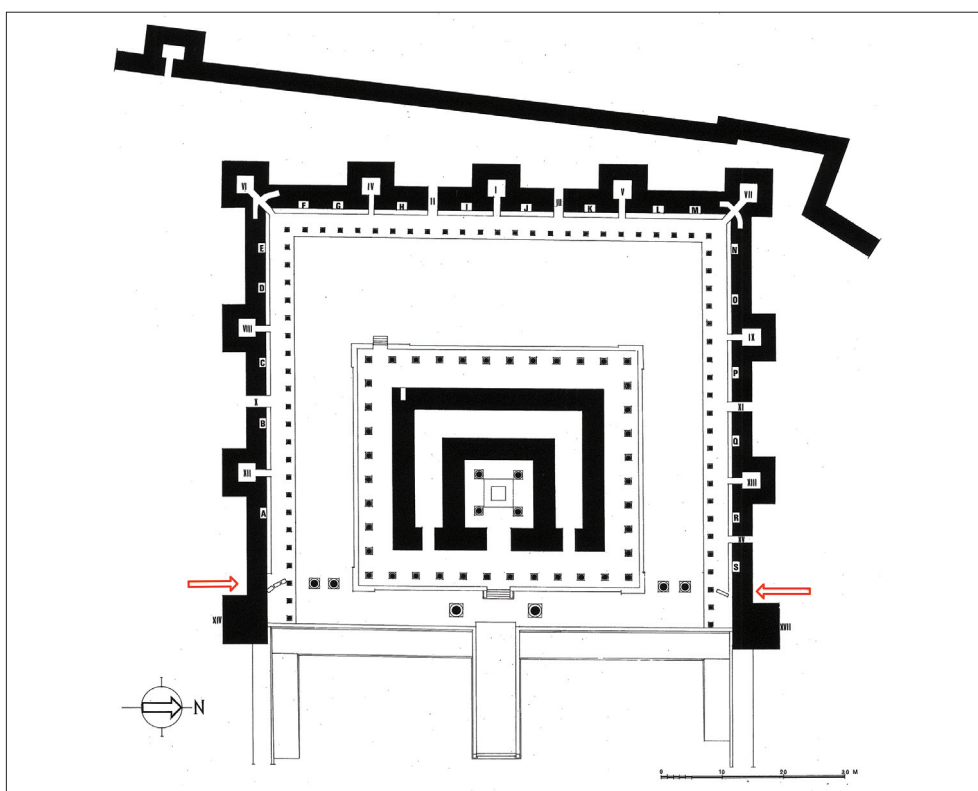
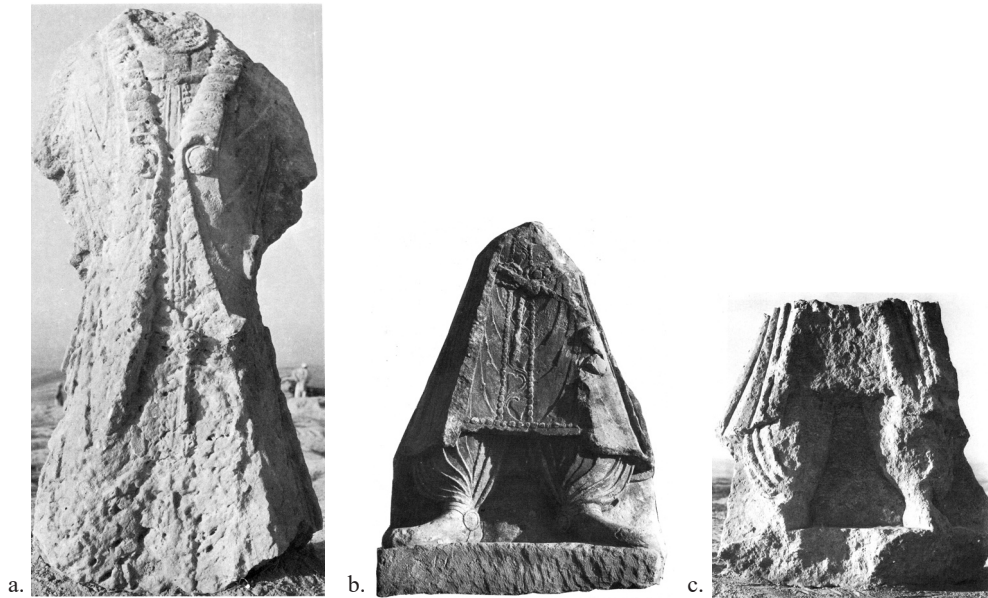


Fig. 7b - Temple A and the *peribolos* on the upper terrace with the find-spot of the statues and the stele (arrow). After SKr: pl. X.



Figs. 8a-c - Surkh Kotal, Statue I (after SKr: pl. 59.184); Statue II (*ibid.*: pl. 60.185); Statue III (*ibid.*: pl. 62.190).

the latter, before 1982 they were moved to Kabul (*ibid.*: 51). They represent frontal male figures wearing the Kushan caftan and floppy trousers. They are sculpted on the round, but are very flat with thin sides and under-detailed backs. Something more than “dalles” (SKr: 119), they were sculpted so to be seen essentially from the front, slightly detached from, but certainly against a wall, not isolated (Fig. 8).

The feet of Statue I are missing, but it has been associated with a plinth on which what remains of a foot is visible. Statues II and III stand on a small base with splayed feet, wearing boots. These bases were inserted in low, plain plinths. The plinth of Statue I, and the gap of the one of Statue II, were found close to each other in square A.XVI, which is the left corner of the front entrance of the court of Temple A. There, according to the excavators, a “chapelle ouverte” was established (Fig. 9). Statue I was found in

H. Falk published other four inscribed but badly mutilated bases (very similar in size and shape to the one from Haji Banda) with standing personages wearing boots, which were found at Spina Warai (Falk 2004: pl. Va-d), a *mohalla* close to Haji Banda. The four bases are inscribed (CKI 546-549) with what presumably are names, one Indian (Devadasa), the others possibly but not necessarily Iranian (I would like to thank Prof. Harry Falk here for his help). The first of the bases bears two inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī, both giving the name of the personage (Bakage) and his function (the builder or the patron of the vihara or statue-house?) (H. Falk, pers. comm.). Considering the imprecise information on the findspot, and the similarity between the five statues (the one from Tahkal and the four from Spina Warai), it is presumable that they are from the same site or monument (called “vihara”), to be located to the W of the old city of Peshawar. Thanks to the courtesy of Prof. Harry Falk (the author of the photographs), good quality pictures of these pieces are reproduced at the end of this section (Figs. 13a-d). Life-size statue-steles of lay donors wearing tunic belted around the waist, and boots, were also discovered at Ranigat (Nishikawa 1994: pl. 102.4) and at Thareli (Mizuno, Higuchi 1978: pl. 22.1). The base of the statue from Ranigat bears a Kharoshti onomastic inscription (CKI 457). These two statues, however, belong to another well-known class of statues of donors, perhaps bareheaded, holding a miniature shrine (Quagliotti 2000). To the list of sculptural representations of Kushan characters, we may also add the relief published by I. Kurita (2018). See Faccenna 1986.



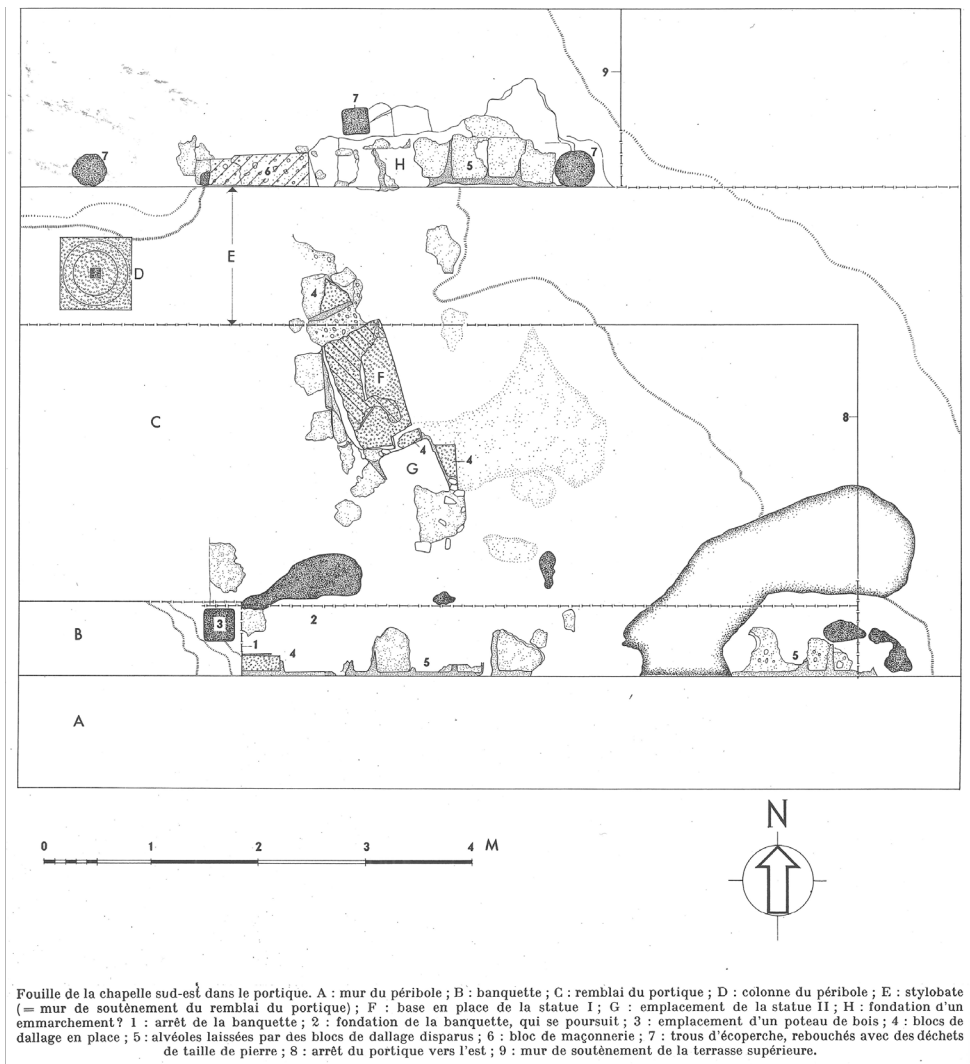


Fig. 9 - Plan of the “chapelle ouverte” S. After SKr: pl. XXIX.

square B 16, well inside the court, while its plinth was found inside the “chapelle” (F in Fig. 9). Statue II was found with its scattered fragments outside the sanctuary on and below the E slopes (in square A.XIV).<sup>13</sup> This statue certainly collapsed (or was violently detached) from the floor of the “chapelle,” where a gap was documented (G in Fig. 9), corresponding to the dimensions of the plinth. Statue III was found inside the court in square E.XIII, while part of the plinth was recovered elsewhere (*ibid.*: 117-119).

According to the excavators, the three statues were housed in the “chapelle ouverte” built at the SE corner of the *peribolos* around Temple A. The plinths of the Statues I and II were associated with a specific treatment of the floor surface. The latter, towards the

<sup>13</sup> See fn. 15, below.



wall South of the *peribolos*, shows a space which *could* have been occupied by the plinth of Statue III (which was found elsewhere). The floor treatment features “un dallage de pierre” which was “scellé à la brique sous-jacente par un mortier dont nous avons retrouvé des restes étendus [...]” (*ibid.*: 36). The alignment of the “dallage” “paraît donc avoir formé à l’extrémité du portique Sud une sorte de chapelle ouverte,” whose limits were uncertain except for the one represented by the S wall of the *peribolos* (*ibid.*) and accessible from N through a small stairway.<sup>14</sup>

Although Schlumberger points out that the position of the statues (and of the stele I might add) is surprising, his conclusions are definitive: “Précisons que rien n’autorise à admettre un remaniement de cette partie du monument. Nous considérons le dallage et l’emplacement des socles des deux statues comme primitifs” (*ibid.*: 37). The “indice positif,” in the excavators’ view, was actually the discovery of the stele at the opposite corner, where a “« chapelle » semblable à celle du portique Sud devait exister” (*ibid.*). The astronomic orientation (hypothesised by Schlumberger), the apparent symmetry of the two “chapelles,” the floor treatment, the alignments, etc., all combined, led the excavators to conclude that these features were integral to the original plan. In a second, later phase, in the opinion of the excavators, the statues were violently damaged (*ibid.*: 118), and removed.<sup>15</sup>

## What Can Be Added

### Architectural Stratigraphy

Overall, the archaeological description of the “chapelle” does not match the planimetric accuracy and the elevation neatness of Temple A (a fact that should not have escaped the attention of the excavators).<sup>16</sup> What is clear though is that at a certain stage there was at least one “chapelle” on the S side, right at the beginning of one side of the *peribolos*, where at least two of the statues were left standing. Structurally this “chapelle” was built with re-used materials, whose destruction left nothing more than a few poorly detectable traces.<sup>17</sup> Nothing at all remains of the other “chapelle” whose existence has been hypothesised on the opposite N side (where the stele was found).

<sup>14</sup> The description was written by D. Schlumberger; see SKr: 31, fn.\*

<sup>15</sup> In fact, some fragments were found close to, or not too far away, from the statues: the left hand S4 was found close to Statue II, S5-8, S13-19 were found in A 16, S9, 10, 12 in A. XIV. Fragment S11 was found not far from Statue III in E.XIV. Other fragments were found inside the court. Left hand S2 (holding a scroll) was found behind Temple A in square M 13 on the floor of the court (stratigraphically coeval to the “chapelle” phase). Right hand S3 (holding an elongated object) was found amidst the debris obstructing the entrance to Tower VI, at the SW corner of the court of Temple A. The head S22 (of Statue I according to Fussman, here attributed to Statue II or III, see Part 2 by Sinisi, below) was found outside the court in the lower terrace X xii. All these fragments can be associated to intentional damages in the final stage of the “chapelle” phase. Unfortunately, we do not know the find-spot of the two fragments of heads S1 and S1a, the first attributed to Statue II by Fussman (SKr: 120, here Statue I is preferred, see Part 2 by Sinisi, below). Regarding the original location of the statues, it seems that the excavators initially considered different hypotheses (SKr: 34).

<sup>16</sup> All the details described in the report somehow point to a possible secondary or late phase for the “chapelle,” and one has the impression that the excavators were also aware of this, at least as a possibility. Note also that there is no graphic documentation of these “chapelle” features either in the general plans or in the restitution/reconstruction published in the excavation report. The graphic documentation of the “chapelle” South is given as a separated plan (*ibid.*: pl. XXIX = Fig. 9). The architectural style and treatment of Temple A is comparable to the (slightly later?) Buddhist platform excavated below the sanctuary (*ibid.*)

<sup>17</sup> If the “chapelle” was made entirely of wood (see no. 3 in Fig. 9: “emplacement d’un poteau de bois;” no. 7, *ibid.*: “trous d’écoperche...”), it would have had building features completely different from the architectural context (regardless of its chronology).

Let us touch for a moment the best evidence of the “chapelle,” i.e. the floor. Floors at the sanctuary always feature a plain beaten soil: “Il n’y a jamais trace de mosaïque, ni de dallage de pierres ou de briques cuites” (*ibid.*: 91). The “chapelle ouverte” S shows, instead, an irregularly paved floor, which looks like a secondary, makeshift floor, formed by fragmentary “dalles” cut and laid down so to fill the spaces around and between the plinths of Statues I and II. Moreover, notwithstanding the “dallage” being rough and disturbed, we cannot find any trace in the graphic documentation which may confirm the installation and later removal of the plinth of Statue III.

On the basis of the available documentation (cross-sections were not included in the publication), it seems evident that the “chapelle” stage cannot be coeval with the original project of Temple A and of the sanctuary as a whole. First, it would have been extremely odd if the statues were destined for such diminutive proscenia. Secondly, the “chapelle” stridently conflicts with the architectural style, building technique, and ground plan of the sanctuary. It is not only a late addition, but also very makeshift. Lastly, the “chapelle” modified the *peribolos*. For example, the space interpreted for Statue III cut the end of the Southern stretch of the *peribolos*’ bank (= no. 1 in Fig. 9: “arrêt de la banquette”), whose continuation was still visible in the foundation (= no. 2 in Fig. 9: “fondation de la banquette, qui se poursuit”). Actually, the entire assemblage cuts the stylobate. Here at least two column bases are missing (cf. Figs. 8 and 9; see fn. 28). Based on this evidence, the “chapelle” should be later than the *peribolos*. In addition to that, it seems that the floor of the “chapelle” was laid on an already eroded surface (see Fig. 9).

Having established that the “chapelle” is possibly later than Temple A, one should also theoretically consider the possibility that the statues were coeval with the “chapelle,” i.e. they were sculpted in a phase later than Temple A. Apart from the iconography, the style (see fn. 25) and logic bear enough elements to dismiss this hypothesis, not to mention that, according to the inscription at Rabatak, four royal images (Kujula Kadphises, the two Vimas, and Kanishka) were installed in the temple from the beginning. Logic would suggest that such stylistically well-carved pieces were produced in an environment where masons should have been able to build around them an architectural framework more elaborated than a makeshift “chapelle ouverte.”<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore possible that originally the stone statuary was not where it has been found. There are also a few reasons linked to the physical features of the pieces, which are described below.

### Physical Data. The Stele

We should start from the weight, the same factor that probably discouraged the archaeologists from moving the stele to the Kabul Museum. I have calculated a weight of approx. 4.3 tons (specific weight compact limestone/dolomite: *c.* 2600 kg/m<sup>3</sup>).

Another aspect to be combined with the weight is that related to positioning height. The figure is larger than life-size. According to my calculations the seated figure is about 1.91 h. If standing, the figure would have been < 3 h. The head (including the tiara) is

<sup>18</sup> With due caution (different classes of statues in different contexts), a comparison can be made with the donor statue from Thareli, Buner (see fn. 12). The life-size statue-stele was found broken near its base. The latter was carefully positioned above the paved floor, against the raised platform of Building X, in front of Stupa 3 (Mizuno, Higuchi 1978: pl. 22.1).

0.50 h., and not 0.40 as it should approximately be. In sculpture the ideal head ratio is generally made as equivalent to 1/5 of a seated figure and 1/8 of a standing one. This ratio is by and large respected in coeval Gandharan sculptures. In the stele, the head has a ratio of 1/4 of the seated figure, which means that the head is slightly bigger than the real proportions. The enlarged dimension of the heads both in the stele and in the stone statues (see below) is intentional, and cannot be explained simply as a visual convention that privileges the head over the body. Instead, it may be a proof that the stele was positioned above the observers' eye-level.

Such proportional rules were well-known to the sculptors working for the early Kushans, e.g. at Khalchayan, where progressive changes in projection and dimensions are masterfully employed in the figures in the frieze of the W wall of the central hall of the "Palace" (Lo Muzio 2017: 123). Such rules remained in use in Gandhara and its surroundings even in Late Antiquity. When we climbed the rock of Jahanabad in Swat to start the restoration of the gigantic Buddha (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) defaced by the Taliban in 2007, we surprisingly found that the face was bigger than expected (1.5 h.; the seated *padmāsana* Buddha is only 4.5 h.). The size of the head was augmented to compensate for the distance of about 9 metres from the viewer's level on the ground.

On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that the stele was possibly inserted on a raised plinth, slightly inclined against a wall, possibly framed, and maybe fixed by tenons (?).<sup>19</sup> On the basis of these details (frame, plinth, and back wall) it is reasonable to conclude that such a space would have most probably been enclosed. In conclusion, based on the general dimensions and proportions, the stele was meant to be displayed raised, but against a wall or a supporting structure, rather than isolated and fixed in the ground. The "trous de mortier, aménagés dans la dalle après sa mise hors d'usage" were certainly dug when the stele was lying horizontally. For the time being, I assume that it represents the last episode of stele's "biography" before the discovery. Still, there is a possibility that the 'mortar holes' were dug in an intermediate period before the stele was re-erected at the NE corner of the *peribolos*.

## Physical Data. The Statues

In our reconstruction, in dimensional terms, the three statues are all life-size or just a tiny bit larger (I: 1.80 m h; II: 1.79 m; III: >1.72 m). If the associations of the head S1 to Statue I and of head S22 to Statue II or III are correct, having the three statues and the two heads the same relative proportional measurements, the statues would have borne heads whose measurements (without headgear) were sensibly larger than expected. The ratio is the same as that of the clay statues that collapsed from the niches of the *peribolos* W. Such disproportion can only be explained if these statues were housed above eye-level on a raised plinth, exactly as we have hypothesized for the stele. The low floor of the "chapelle", where the plinths of the statues were found, does not match the ideal architectural display of the statues.

<sup>19</sup> The analysis of the back face of the stele, when possible, might reveal the presence of sockets or mortices. Faccenna, in reference to the position and height of the Peshawar SRO stele, writes (1985: 95): "Since the back side is smooth, the stele was probably placed up against a wall and, to a certain extent, probably resting on a floor. It was probably located at a certain height if any weight is to be attributed to the inclined plane on which the figure's feet are placed [...]."

On the basis of the above, the recovery spot of the statues and of the stele was most certainly the secondary location of the stone statuary. In our hypothesis, at a certain stage the stele and the statues were moved from their original location to the place where they were eventually found. One cannot escape the impression that the statues were already damaged—we do not know to what extent—when they were moved to their secondary location. Certainly, the stele reached the new place in worse conditions. The removal from the plinth and back wall damaged its edges, to which we should add intentional chipping and obliterations, the traces of which are still visible.

The search for the original location of the stone statuary is based on tiny, scanty details. On the basis of the archaeological data, it looks unlikely that the statues and the stele, individually or grouped, were housed inside the Temple A (see below).<sup>20</sup>

## 1. The Towers

Let us now hypothetically consider the towers of the precinct around the *peribolos*. This walled feature is the upper end of what borders both the N and S sides of the monumental terraces and stairways. That precinct, all along the four terraces, is marked by square towers projecting on the outside giving the entire monument a fortified appearance.<sup>21</sup> Walls and towers are decorated on the outside by a coherent geometric decoration with triangles, indented stepped rectangles, with alternate arrow-shaped false-loopholes (on the wall) and true loopholes (on the towers). This decorative pattern is coherently utilised on the outside of the precinct wall, inside the towers, and on the merlons of Temple A. Around the *peribolos* (which opens to the E) the precinct features three towers on each side, and two towers at the NW and SW corners. Alternating with the false-towers, are two entrances each on the N and W sides, and one on the S side. With the exceptions of the first towers from E (XIV and XVII), which surviving parts were apparently solid (i.e. taller than the others?), and those at the corners (VI and VII), functioning as stairwell to access the upper “chemin de ronde,” the remaining seven towers are hollow (three to the W, two on the sides). The meaning of these towers is not immediately evident. Rather than defensive structures, they might have been spaces evoking symbolic guardhouses. Some additional information on the functions of these false-towers can be collected from apparently stranded archaeological evidence from inside the towers of the N side. Inside Tower VII *tropaea* or parts of a heraldic tableau were found, along with the horns of an ibex (?) and parts of a coat of armour (Fussman in SKr: 48).<sup>22</sup> The

<sup>20</sup> The reconstruction of the cella of Temple A, as proposed in SKr, is very sound.

<sup>21</sup> The pseudo-defensive or pseudo-military features have been thoroughly analysed in the excavation report (SKr: 102-103). See also Filigenzi 2020: 179-181.

<sup>22</sup> “Sur le (sol?) de la tour VII, gisaient les morceaux d’une cuirasse à écailles en fer : contre la paroi Sud, un grand élément, trouvé incurvé, peut-être une protection de membre (bras ou jambe) ; contre la paroi Ouest, un élément formé en manchon, mais se refermant sur lui-même comme une collerette, et portant des traces de tissu ; contre la paroi Ouest, toujours, sous cette « collerette », une corne (de chamois ?) dans laquelle se voyait un clou” (SKr: 48). In Kushan environment, armour coats can be associated to cultic contexts. We can quote two well-studied cases from Gandhara and Swat: the ‘House D’ at Shaikhan-Dheri and the precinct of ‘Temple B2’ at Barikot (see Olivieri 2016). The armour plates documented at Surkh Kotal (Fussman, Guillaume 1990: nos. 560-566) are identical to those documented at Barikot between the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> and end-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (Olivieri 2011). To these examples, we should also add the potentially more cogent case of the famous sculpted friezes of the central hall of the building of Khalchayan: the suits of armour held by a male dignitary or prince represented on the W wall (see ref. in Sinisi 2020). On Khalchayan, Surkh Kotal, etc., see also Colliva 2018; Taasob 2019.

pieces from Tower VII are lost and nothing remains but the description (Fussman, Guillaume 1990: 132: no. 599bis). Inside Tower XIII, in a secluded space in front of wall NW, a deposit of valuable objects was found: bronze and metal objects, parts of furniture, a miniature Doric column, and ibex horns. Tower XIII (like VII and IX) was accessible by descending a flight of steps below the level of the court. This is delicate point of the stratigraphy of the monument, which I do not fully understand. However, the assemblage in Tower XIII (see Fussman, Guillaume 1990: nos. 517-522; Fussman in SKr: 48), can be considered hypothetically synchronous with the early phase of the sanctuary. In this case, the rooms inside the towers might have been therefore consistent with a function where statues of the ancestors, family suits of armour (or trophies?) and other paraphernalia were preserved. In rooms utilised as statue-shrines, statues could have been reasonably located towards the back but detached, raised on a podium and fixed into their plinth. The wall decoration does not conflict with their presence inside.

The stele needs a different treatment though: a back wall, against which it should be necessarily fixed, raised on a podium, within its frame. If the towers were the location, in terms of symmetry the stele (if it was a unicum) should have been housed in Tower I, the central one on the W side. This side of the court—giving direct access to the back of the Temple—is the one where the majority of clay fragments of religious statuary were found. I could not find any data to determine whether the walls of Tower I were decorated as the others or plain. In the second case it might have housed the stele. In any case, the walls (c. 2.0 m thick) were strong enough to support a 5-ton sculpture. In this hypothesis, we would have had a scheme where painted clay gods (?) in the niches would alternate with ancestors' shrines, with the central one dedicated to the stele.

## 2. The *peribolos*' Bank (Fig. 10)

However, there is an alternative hypothesis. The inner side of the precinct wall, with plain plaster (*ibid.*: 31), features, all along its length, a low brick-made bank (c. <1 m width and 0.7 m height). Above the bank the wall features niches (c. 1.7 m width; 1.2 m depth); at regular intervals, entrances to the towers (c. 1 m width) interrupt the continuity of the bank. The niches are apparently associated to a series of fragments in clay pertaining to bigger-than-life-size painted reliefs that collapsed on the floor in front of the niches. If we consider here the pieces illustrated in pls. 70 and 71 (*ibid.*), which belong to more figures, they are all in proportion to a standing 2-metre high figure. It is not clear why such well-structured bank, or bench, was built against the back wall. Certainly, it was meant to emphasise the raised niches, a kind of proscenium for the row of figures. Yet what if it was used also as podium, in this case for the stele and the stone statuary? The bank (whose max. depth is 0.6 m) is deep enough to house the statues. This way, clay and stone images would have alternated on the back wall of the *peribolos*. The proportional ratio between body and head seems to be in both instances the same, implying that they might have been fixed more or less at the same height. The clay statues are a bit taller than the stone statuary, a difference which is compensated by their relative positions: clay figures projecting from niches in the background, and stone statues on the frontline. The result would have been a captivating chiaroscuro of materials and textures, of bas-reliefs projecting from the background, and free-standing statues in the foreground. The effect would have been impressive. That statues of kings (ancestors and rulers), as well as of gods were purposely ordered by Kanishka for temples is clearly stated in the inscription of Rabatak (Falk 2015a: §096, 113: lines 11-12). Again, here there is no specific central space for the stele (again: if it was a unicum), although the walls (c. 3.0 m thick)

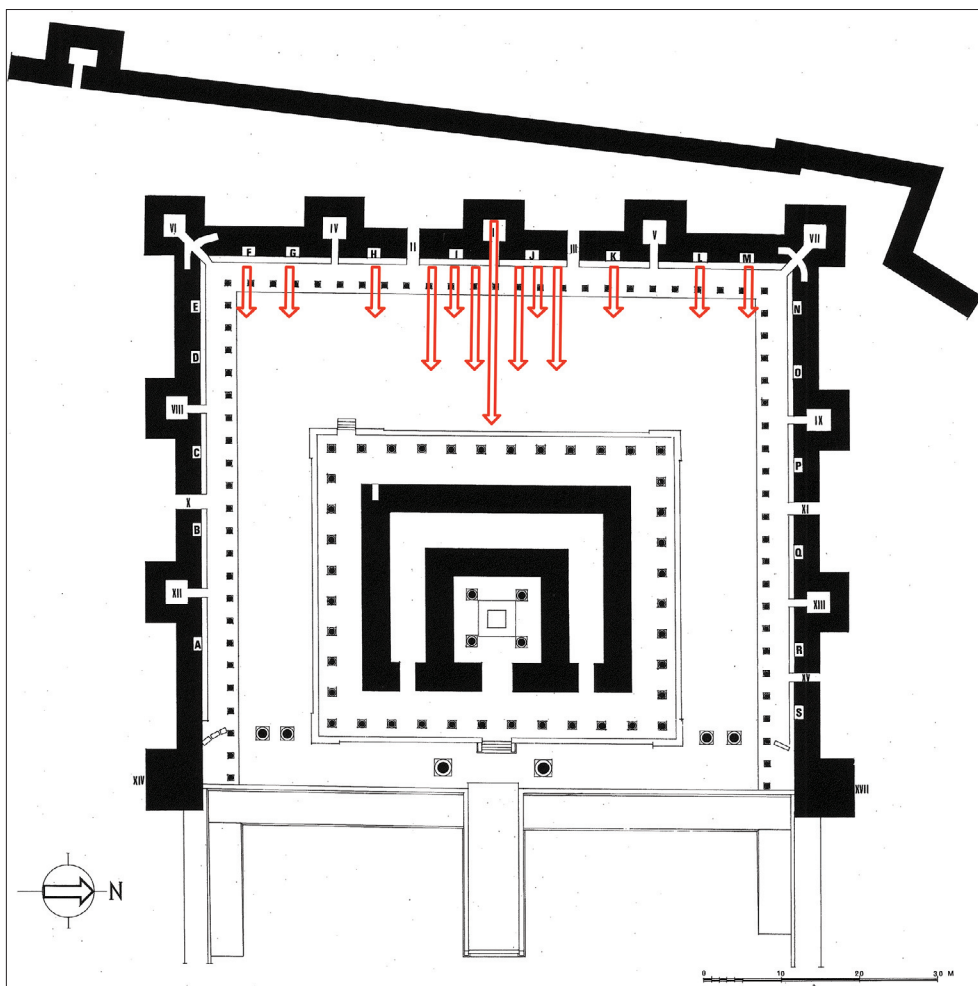


Fig. 10 - The possible location of the Statues and Stele (Fig. 7b modified).

were strong enough to support a 5-ton sculpture. We should remember though that we cannot take for granted that the surviving statuary corresponds to the total of the original.

As we can see, there are pros and cons to both possibilities, for the towers and the back bank. I am pretty sure though that, whatever was the real location of the stele and of statues, the architectural spaces opening along the back (W) of the *peribolos* are a plausible location for an “ancestors’ gallery” in a sanctuary which certainly was—at the time of its foundation—meant to be the sanctuary of a long-ruling dynasty. Let me conclude with a couple of *argumenta e silentio*. If the latter proposition were true, it would imply, for example, that more statues were planned for the future, and empty spaces were set aside for them. But if the surviving statuary corresponds to the total, the dynastic dedication of the sanctuary knew a premature stop, and that process stopped with Huviska. Fabrizio Sinisi will elaborate more on these aspects in his part. Meanwhile, we can anticipate another point which may give a hint to better set the chronology of the later phases.



## The Structural Phases

At a certain point, the statues and the stele were damaged and moved to the opposite ends of the East side of the court. We can consider these two events as separate. First the statuary and the original Temple A were damaged. Then, after a certain hiatus, the “chappelle” was established, and the statuary moved to its final location. Between these two events we can interpolate two other structural phases (SKr: 139-143).

The earlier, which is documented only by the inscription SK 4 and by a supposed first phase of Pit P, occurred when the sanctuary was almost completed (but we still have many unfinished pieces). It must have occurred around 158 CE (year 31), during the reign of Huvishka, which follows the displacement of the “gods” to the nearby “stronghold” of Lraf/Drapsaka, and a first abandonment (SK 4; Falk 2015a: §107, 122: lines 3-4).

The second structural phase is linked to the abandonment of Temple A and the establishment of the “ensemble” formed by Temple B - Court C - Building D, and possibly by the second phase of Pit P and Canal II.<sup>23</sup> In this phase the statues and the stele were not yet moved to what according to our hypothesis was only their final destination, and already in a partially degraded state. The chronology of the late “ensemble” is unclear. The obvious *post quem* term is given by the date of inscription SK 4, re-employed in the second phase of Pit P (c. 158 CE, see below).<sup>24</sup> All the evidence (SKr: 145-146) points to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. to the early Sasanian period.<sup>25</sup> In this phase, the meaning and orientation of the sanctuary changed completely, the S wall of the court and Towers VIII and XII were reutilised as passageways or rear entrances for the new temples. Although heavily manipulated, the sanctuary was still functioning, with a new temple and various new buildings, and possibly also fed by a rehabilitated source of water.<sup>26</sup>

While both the synchronicity of the “late ensemble” B-C-D and their posterity to Temple A are established facts (*ibid.*: 47-48),<sup>27</sup> a revision of the general stratigraphic history led us to hypothesise that the “chappelle” stage is later than the “late ensemble.” After the “late ensemble” was destroyed by a fire, we can place a final re-use of some loci: the reconstruction in the cella of Temple A (feature A 1: still a temple?), maybe the re-use of Tower VI (SW corner), the “survie misérable” of Temple B (*ibid.*: 48), and the erection of the “chappelle” with the new display of the statuary. Both on the floor of feature A1, raised upon the collapsed debris of the old Temple A (*ibid.*: pl. XV.C; Fig. 11a), and in Tower VI (*ibid.*: 47), four bases from the *peribolos* were reused to sustain a roof (*ibid.*: pls. 16.42

<sup>23</sup> This phase occurred *post*-Vasudeva, as proved by the numismatic evidence (SKr: 142), in accordance with a recurrent experience for archaeologists working on Kushan complexes.

<sup>24</sup> Also blocks with *ex-post* engraved tridents were documented in the rehabilitated staircase of Pit P (SKr: pls. 46, 122).

<sup>25</sup> And that besides the establishment of a fire cult in Temple B, the simplified treatment of the foliage of the pseudo-Gandharan Corinthian capitals of the altar of Temple B recalls very closely the treatment of the stucco decoration in certain Gandharan sites, e.g. at Amluk-dara, stupa 61 (dated post-300 CE) (Olivieri 2018).

<sup>26</sup> The water source was a critical part of the management of the sanctuary, as we know from inscription SK 4 (Falk 2015a: §107; see also Grenet 2015: 209; Filigenzi 2020: 181).

<sup>27</sup> In this phase part of the original friezes of the Temple A were re-used as construction material (SKr: 43-44). There is no archaeological data to establish that there was a gap between the abandonment of Temple A and the construction of Temple B, and if there was, how long it was. The information from SKr is scarce: that Temple A was dilapidated when temple B was built does not necessarily mean that A was already abandoned. We know that parts of Temple A were used in the “late ensemble.”

[Fig. 11b] and 18.46).<sup>28</sup> In this stage part of the *peribolos* might have been already blocked by the ruins of Building D, while the N stretches of the precinct wall might have been already ruined. Apart from the SW corner, the re-used space was confined to the E front of the old plan. The new structures are in fact all built along this side, when possibly the rest of the structure was ruined and partly inaccessible. All the evidence suggests that the “chapelle,” with the new positioning of the statues and the stele, was part of this final cluster. Certainly, for those who rearranged the ruined structures into this final cluster, the statues as well as the stele must have had a positive meaning, as they show the recalling of a past memory. My first thought goes to the Kidarites, as they were in that period probably the only ones reclaiming the Kushan legacy (de La Vaissière 2016).<sup>29</sup> The problem is—as always—chronology. One single element is noted by G. Fussman in the last chapter of SKr: “[...] sur le sommet de la couche d’incendie, on a trouvé une lampe en terre cuite, en forme de quadrupède (cheval [?])<sup>30</sup> portant une cupule” (SKr: 143). To the best of my knowledge, this evidence can be compared to a figurine from Begram III (another chronological dilemma *alas!*) (Ghirshman 1946: pls. XX.6, XLVI [BG 168]).<sup>31</sup>

## Inscription SK 2

A problematic element for the chronology of the site comes from the assemblage of feature A1. On the back bank of the latter were laid two blocks with a filleted frame. One of the two blocks bears, at the corner, an “incomplete” inscription (SK 2), simply bearing a date: “year 279, m[onth...]” (*ibid.*: 135).<sup>32</sup> Besides palaeography, the alignment of the inscription, vertical, along the left bottom side of the frame, would lead to the conclusion that the block was already inscribed when—like all the other ‘things’ of feature A1—it was re-employed.<sup>33</sup> In the earlier stage (the late “ensemble”) we have evidence of reuse

<sup>28</sup> One should remember that at least two column bases had been already removed from the “chapelle” area (see above). How long did the “late ensemble” last before it caught fire? We do not have any positive clue from the excavation. Possibly, it lasted less than a century through the first Sasanian occupation period; 50-70 years are more than enough to explain the eleven layers of plaster on the inner walls of the cella of Temple B, and the two metres of ash deposits from its *ignis perennis* (SKr: 45, 142).

<sup>29</sup> “The Kidarite dynasty was the last to make use of the title of Kushan-shah; it was avoided by the Hephthalites, who thus distanced themselves politically from their defeated predecessors [with refs.]” (de La Vaissière 2016).

<sup>30</sup> “[...] celle d’une lampe de terre cuite, en forme de quadrupède (cheval?) portant sur le dos une cupule, que nous avons recueillie dans la partie supérieure de la couche d’incendie, exactement au-dessus de l’autel (dont l’existence n’était pas encore connue)” (SKr: 43). The figurine was not inserted in Fussman, Guillaume 1990.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] figurine en terre cuite rouge, traces de peinture noir, représentant un éléphant avec une coupe sur le dos. Long. 11; haut. 7” (Ghirshman 1946: 195).

<sup>32</sup> “[...] la lecture des autres lettres laissées à l’état d’esquisse et superficiellement incisées n’étant pas sûre” (Bernard 2001: fn. 71).

<sup>33</sup> If the inscription was synchronous with feature A1, or post-Kushan, that “year 279” could be calculated either with Kanishka’s year 1 (c. 406 CE), or with the ‘Bactrian era’ (c. year 502 CE). In the first case the date would fall during the Kidarite phase when the Kanishka’s era was not used anymore in Bactria; in the second case should be placed after the Kidarites were expelled from Bactria (Grenet 2005; on the Bactrian era see Sims-Williams, de Blois 2018, but also de la Vaissière 2019). Palaeographic analysis (see also Bivar 1963) of the letters allowed P. Bernard to formulate an earlier chronology: “Le type de graphie proche de la grecque que l’on a sur SK3 se retrouve sur l’inscription bactrienne SK 2 de Surkh Kotal, dite inachevée, avec le même *nu* à branches égales, et un *omicron* rond” (Bernard 2001: 301). Moreover: “A.D.H. Bivar avait déjà relevé que la graphie du *nu* dans l’inscription inachevée SK 2 était plus ancienne que celle utilisée dans l’inscription de restauration SK 4 [Bivar 1963: 500]. On peut ajouter qu’elle est aussi plus ancienne que la forme de la lettre dans l’inscription de fondation SK 1. Elle est en revanche exactement semblable au *nu* de ζηνοβίδο dans l’inscription SK 3 de Palamède” (*ibid.*: fn. 72). “La même date de 279 [...] se lit en effet sur deux autres



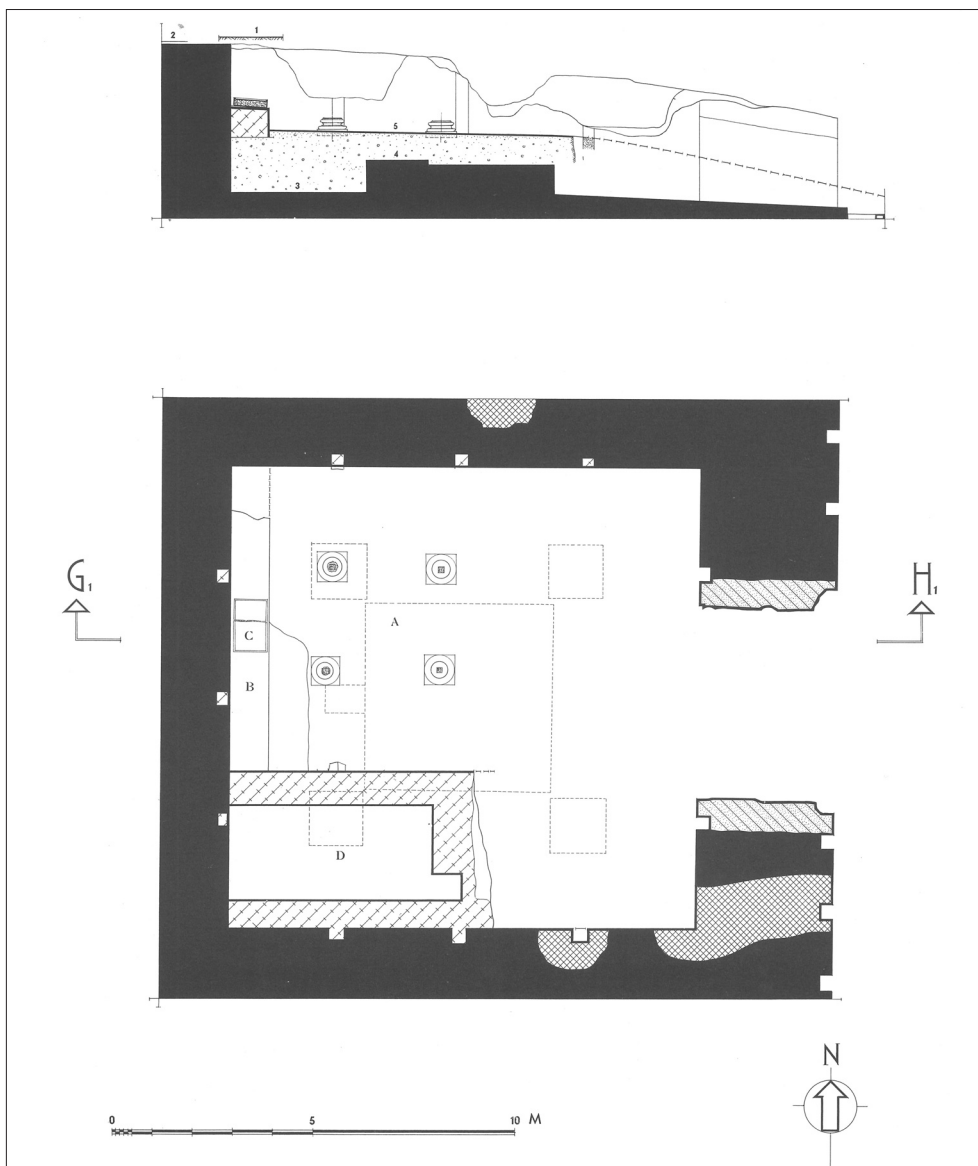


Fig. 11a - Feature A 1, plan. After SKr: pl. XV.

of inscribed (and dated) materials which show an apparently intentional disregard for the writing and its contents.<sup>34</sup>

textes, l'un en bactrien (DN 1), l'autre en kharoshthi (DN 4), d'une inscription rupestre trilingue gravée sur une arête rocheuse dominant la cuvette du Dasht-i Nawur à une centaine de km au Sud-Ouest de Caboul" (Bernard 2001: 303).

<sup>34</sup> On the shape and dimensions of the block of SK 2, see Bernard 2001: 302. The foundation inscription (SK 1) was deprived of the majority of its blocks; the restoration inscriptions SK 4 A and B were reused in the remaking of the corridor of Pit P.



16. 41. — Aménagement tardif de la cella (après l'incendie). Vue prise du sud-ouest. A gauche (à l'ouest), sur une banquette, dalle SK 2.



16. 42. — Aménagement tardif de la cella, vue prise du nord-ouest. A droite (ouest), dalle SK 2.

Fig. 11b - Features A 1, a view. After SKr: pl. 16.



Fig. 12a - Statue-stele of Miramarega, from Tahkal; S.R.O. no. 434. Photo Fawad Khan. Courtesy Abdul Samad, Director DOAM KP.

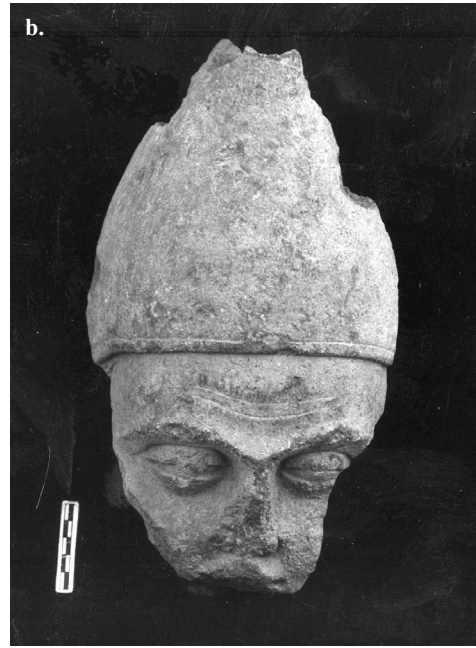


Fig. 12b - Head from Tahkal; S.R.O. no. 622. Photo Zarawar Khan. Courtesy Abdul Samad, Director DOAM KP.

If so, the inscription SK 2 should be handed back to the earlier phases of the sanctuary, notwithstanding its chronology being *a fortiori* based on an era whose 279<sup>th</sup> year is earlier than Kanishka's year 1. Hence it should precede the conventional date for the foundation of the sanctuary (Fussman in SKr: 135; see also Bivar 1963; Fussman 1980). Paul Bernard discussed the theoretical possibility that there was an earlier stage of the sanctuary, preceding Kanishka's consecration (Bernard 2001: 302-303).<sup>35</sup> This element has a potentially remarkable value for the study of the stele, especially for the following points: as Sinisi will demonstrate below, the stele can portray one of the two Vimas; Vima I Taktu will match the year 279 of SK 2 (as in DN 1 and DN 4); the stele—so far a *unicum*—theoretically may have been sculpted before the statues. There is a problem with the three-

<sup>35</sup> “Il se trouve que l'inscription inachevée SK 2 est datée de l'an 279 d'une ère non précisée. Cette datation vaudrait donc aussi, à peu de chose près, pour l'inscription de Palamède SK 3. Quelle que soit l'ère à partir de laquelle on fasse commencer le comput, il est admis que celle-ci doit être antérieure à celle inaugurée par Kanishka, et que l'année 279 est donc, elle aussi, très vraisemblablement antérieure au commencement de la nouvelle ère kanishkéenne. Il en découle que Palamède ne peut avoir été l'architecte du sanctuaire de Kanishka et que son activité à Surkh Kotal s'est exercée antérieurement à ce roi. Nous savons en fait sous lequel des prédécesseurs de Kanishka il y a travaillé” (Bernard 2001: 302).

The same year 279 calculated on the supposed Yavana era of 175 BCE (= c. 104 CE) is indicated also at Dasht-e Nawur, both in DN 1 and DN 4, in association with the name of Vima Taktu, (Falk 2015a: §89 and §90, 108-109, with ref.). A year 287 (= c. 112 CE) in association with the name of Vima Kadphises is recorded in the inscription of Khalatse, Ladakh (*ibid.*: §091, 109, with ref.). The numeral '200,' both at DN 1 and at SK 2 is expressed by Σ (see Bernard 2001: fn. 73).





Figs. 13a-d - Statue-stelae 1-4 from Spin Warai. Photos Harry Falk.

quarter view, as highlighted by Sinisi (see Part 2, below). However, the three-quarter view was already utilized in Gandhara since mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE (e.g. at Saidu Sharif I, Faccenna 2001), at Toprak-kala and Khalchayan, and also at SK (for example in capitals of both the podium of Temple A and of the ‘Buddhist platform’), and in the unfinished relief (SKr: 55.161).

In the hypothetical case that the stele was sculpted earlier than the statues, it might have been prepared for an earlier, unfinished sanctuary.<sup>36</sup> We suppose that the stele was meant to be framed in a niche above the ground or floor level, and the “absence of a specific central space for the stele” in the sanctuary, as we know it from the excavations, remains a major problem.

In any case, at the end of the last structural phase, the three statues were broken again (many fragments were found along with them), one was moved away, one was thrown down the slope, all left lying on the ground, where they remained buried and almost pro-

<sup>36</sup> “Les fouilles conduites sur l’emplacement du temple A de Kanishka à Surkh Kotal n’ont pas repéré d’état antérieur à l’édifice érigé par le souverain, mais les tentatives pour sonder l’endroit en profondeur ont été limitées à quelques fenêtres et l’on ne peut exclure l’existence sur la colline, plutôt que dans la plaine, d’un édifice sacré pré-kanishkéen dont les travaux auraient été dirigés par l’architecte Palamède vers 100 de n. è. sous le règne de Wima Taktu. Autant que les inscriptions du Dasht-i Nawur, où pour la première fois apparaît un témoignage écrit de la langue bactrienne au service de laquelle a été mobilisé l’alphabet grec, autant que la statue royale du sanctuaire de Mathura, l’extraordinaire abondance du monnayage anonyme dit de Sôter Mégas dont la propriété est désormais rendue à Wima Taktu et que l’on trouve répandu en grande quantité de la vallée de l’Oxus à celle du Gange porte témoignage de l’importance de ce roi. Il n’y a rien que de vraisemblable à supposer qu’il ait été à l’origine des premières constructions royales sur le site de Surkh Kotal” (Bernard 2001: 304). On Palamedes, *contra* see Sims-Williams 2012: 78

tected. As against this the stele, which remained partly *en plein air* for 15 centuries, got progressively weathered, devolving eventually into an almost amorphous state, which is the state we have dealt with.

L.M.O.

## PART 2—THE STONE IMAGES AND KUSHAN ROYAL ICONOGRAPHY

### *The Stone Images: the Stele*

A crucial role in the *bagolango* was obviously reserved for the images that portrayed the members of the dynasty, associated within the complex to the deity that was worshipped in the cella of the temple in order to make manifest the divine patronage on the dynasty.

While all the surviving images are fragmentary, the stele is somehow set apart by its peculiar design, which is the reason for the study of Verardi, taking into account its poor state of preservation.

### The Lion Throne

The better preserved part of the stele is in fact the lower, at least for what concerns the main figure, the enthroned king. A crucial feature is the throne leg shaped as a feline paw, which has duly attracted comments from both Schlumberger and Verardi. Verardi explicitly labelled the throne as a *simhāsana*,<sup>37</sup> which allowed him to set the image in the framework of an Indian interpretation of the message conveyed by the stele, namely the depiction of the Kushan king as a *cakravartin* (Verardi 1983: 272-275).

Since 1983 the discussion on Kushan royal ideology has made significant progress, and the idea of an Indian background to the image of the stele is no longer tenable. While in India Kushan lion-thrones may well have been seen as *simhāsana*, and an Indian visiting the Surkh Kotal temple may have considered the king depicted on the stele as a *cakravartin*, it is extremely unlikely that such a reading was significant in the original Bactrian environment of Surkh Kotal, which is that of the local regional variant of Zoroastrianism.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, lion-thrones are attested in the Parthian *oecumene*, from Old Nisa to Dura and Commagene,<sup>39</sup> where obviously no Indian association can be detected. The pattern is of Achaemenid origin, and as such transmitted to Kushan period Bactria directly within an Iranian cultural horizon,<sup>40</sup> be it exclusively local or under Western Iranian, namely Parthian, influence.<sup>41</sup>

The lion throne is well documented in Kushan royal iconography,<sup>42</sup> starting with the statue of the enthroned Vima I found at Mat (Fig. 14a),<sup>43</sup> on which Verardi built his in-

<sup>37</sup> As had Rosenfield before (1967: 183-186), preferring, however, to highlight its Western Iranian resonances.

<sup>38</sup> See Grenet 2015 for the most recent discussion of Kushan Zoroastrianism.

<sup>39</sup> Sinisi 2017: 903, fn. 186 (with references to further literature).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the ivory leg with feline paw recently found at Akchakhan Kala, Chorasmia (on which see Sinisi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov 2018).

<sup>41</sup> On the influence of Arsacid Parthian patterns of royal iconography on the Kushans see Sinisi 2017.

<sup>42</sup> A recent summary is found in Sinisi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov 2018: 19, fn. 34.

<sup>43</sup> In 1983, the enthroned king was universally identified as Vima Kadphises, as the name of Vima (I) Taktu was still unknown. On the identification of the Mat enthroned king with Vima Taktu provided by the Rabatak inscription see Sims-Williams, Cribb 1995/1996: 97; on the name of this king, see Falk 2009.

terpretation in accordance with its Indian context.<sup>44</sup> Another meaningful comparison here is the terracotta medallion found in Khalchayan,<sup>45</sup> which portrays an enthroned Kushan king seen in full-face view with two further figures on the sides (Fig. 14b). In its turn, the image of the medallion is manifestly linked to that of the enthroned Vima Kadphises seen frontally on some of his double dinars (Fig. 14c), despite the fact that on the coins the throne has no feline legs and the head of the king is turned to the side. Indeed, in addition to the general similarity, in both instances the king holds a twig in the right hand. A further numismatic comparison is provided by a copper coin series from the Hazara district, unfortunately known only in a single specimen: on the obverse an enthroned king is depicted in a very similar way, i.e. seen from the front with only the head in profile to the left, whereas two male figures facing each other are seen on the reverse. While the reverse type is badly worn, the inscription surrounding it appears to be in Bactrian, and the series has been ascribed to Vima Taktu (Cribb 2015: 140, fig. 60).

### The Topcoat or Caftan

It must be noted that, in addition to the throne, some of these comparisons provide another significant iconographic link with the Surkh Kotal stele. This pertains to the rendering of a minor feature, which further highlights the deep connections between all these images across the various media. In the photo of the whole stele in the 1983 publication (SKr: pl. 65), a descending line (Fig. 15a) is detectable on the part of the throne seat that is visible just above the lion leg, beside the right knee of the king—the left one for the viewer. This appears to be a thickening representing the edge of the royal caftan or topcoat, apparently what Schlumberger was referring to when he wrote “des restes des draperie enveloppant les pieds et laissant notamment deviner le pied droit” (SKr: 122). This iconographic detail finds an exact parallel on the above-mentioned double dinars of Vima Kadphises that depict the king, seen from the front, sitting on a throne: the topcoat covers the almost bulging knee in the same way, hanging from the throne seat with its edge parallel to the king’s leg (Fig. 15b). The same treatment is detectable on the medallion from Khalchayan (cf. Sinisi 2019: 36-37) (Fig. 14b), clearly hinting at a common iconographic repertoire that included a shared approach even with regard to the stylistic rendering of specific details.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning a further possible link of the stele with the Khalchayan medallion: if the ‘object’ visible on the stele on the right of the enthroned king—the left for the viewer—really is a human figure, we would have a compositional similarity with the medallion, as in both instances a standing figure would be depicted beside the enthroned ruler, although the relationship between the figures in the two images appears to be of different nature.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the possibility that a deity could be depicted on the stele beside the king would make the image an “investiture scene” similar to those hinted at by the Kushan coin repertoire,<sup>47</sup> especially from Kanishka onwards, as the king on the obverse receives a wreath or a blessing from the deity pictured on the reverse. Such “investiture scenes” were known in the region since no later than the

<sup>44</sup> A monumental stone image of a similarly enthroned king is known from Gokarneshvara Tila, in the outskirts of Mathura, see Rosenfield 1967: 142-143, 148-149, and pl. 11: the tiara and the lion-throne leave few doubts that a Kushan king is depicted.

<sup>45</sup> Pugačenkova 1962, where the king was, however, wrongly identified as a local ruler of Chaganian.

<sup>46</sup> In its turn, the presence of the secondary figure beside the king on the medallion links it to two Kushan seals with investiture scenes in which a secondary figure is visible behind the king, see Sinisi 2019: 35-37.

<sup>47</sup> On the two Kushan seals with investiture scene (see above fn. 46) the image is explicit, as the king directly faces the deity.

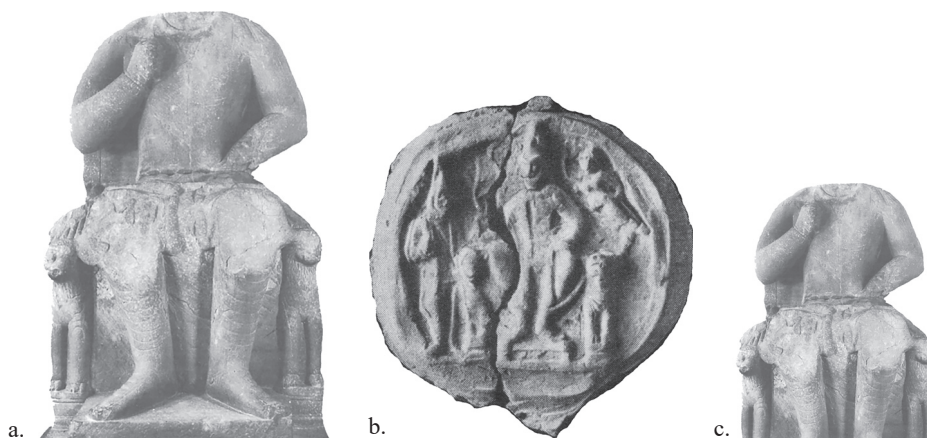


Fig. 14a - Vima I, Mat. After Zimmer 1955: pl. 59.

Fig. 14b - Medallion, Khalchayan. After Abdullaev, Rtveladze, Shishkin 1991: no. 183.

Fig. 14c - Vima Kadphises, gold double dinar, Classical Numismatic Group Triton X (9-1-2007), lot 469.



Fig. 15a - Surkh Kotal, Stele, detail. After SKr: pl. 65.

Fig. 15b - Vima Kadphises, double dinar, detail of 14c.

second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, as attested by the coinage of Zeionises/Jihonika (Bopearachchi 2008, with references), in all likelihood as result of the import of patterns of royal imagery from Parthian Iran. Why among the royal images at Surkh Kotal the king of the stele would be the only one to be depicted in an investiture scene remains, however, an open question, even in the light of the fact that no similar scene is attested at the *devakula* of Mat.



In any case, the comparisons for the enthroned king of the stele that are provided by Kushan royal iconography consistently point to the period of Vima I or Vima II.<sup>48</sup>

### The Head and the Tiara

In its general shape, as nothing more is visible due to the bad condition of preservation, the tiara worn by the king on the stele is compatible with that chronological setting.<sup>49</sup> The interpretation of the ‘hair’ mass falling over the left shoulder requires, on the other hand, some elaboration. Schlumberger wrote of long braids, which seem to be visible also in the main photograph of the stele (SKr: pl. 65).<sup>50</sup> The problem is that no Kushan king is known to have worn his hair in long braids, which are a feature of the following Kushano-Sasanian period, as direct result of the influence of Sasanian royal iconography. Clearly, this apparent discrepancy could pose some difficulties in interpreting the identity of the king on the stele. However, a Gandharan relief, now in the Lahore Museum (Rosenfield 1967: fig. 77, and p. xxxix for the details), provides the key to solve the question: a king in Kushan costume is depicted standing full-length, the body seen frontally with the head in a slight three-fourth view to the right (Fig. 16a).<sup>51</sup> The king wears a diademed conical tiara with a moon crescent mounted in front (Fig. 16b), somehow recalling a pattern found on coins of Huvishka.<sup>52</sup>

What matters more is that the good preservation allows detecting all the details of the head, including the exposed ear with its conspicuous earring and the ribbed diadem ties immediately behind it. It is easy to see that, in terms of volumes on the stone, the broadly triangular-shaped combination of these two features corresponds exactly with what is visible in the same place beside the head of the enthroned king of the Surkh Kotal stele (Fig. 16c). The “segmentation” that was deemed to be braided hair in fact represents the ribbing of the diadem ties.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, the relief represents a perfectly matching comparison for the head of the king of the stele coming from Kushan imperial iconography as attested by Gandharan art.

### The General Iconography

On the other hand, a mix of iconographic patterns from different time-frames within the Kushan period seems apparent, with the coexistence in the stele of features remi-

<sup>48</sup> Although isolated series in copper with a frontal portrait of the seated king on the obverse are known for Kanishka as well as for Huvishka, see Göbl 1984: no. 803 and pl. 157, Type V for Kanishka, and nos. 934, 937, 940, 942, 944, 951, and pl. 159, Type XXVII for Huvishka.

<sup>49</sup> Both Schlumberger (SKr: 122) and Verardi (1983: 272) agree in defining the headgear worn by the king on the stele as a tiara.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. also Verardi 1983: 272-273, who did not mention braids but wrote of “long hair falling on the shoulders,” see above the synoptic chart.

<sup>51</sup> With his right hand the king is picking some offerings from a bowl held by a secondary figure, and wears tunic and trousers. Another royal character in a very similar posture, but wearing a fur-lined caftan, is visible on a relief from Hadda, see Rosenfield 1967: fig. 93. Unfortunately, the head is missing. Rosenfield (1967: 240) connected these two figures to a third one, smaller in dimensions, found on a stele from Mt. Karamar. Yet the latter figure, although depicted in the same posture, is dressed differently, with no trousers and headgear resembling a turban.

<sup>52</sup> On his face, the king wears no beard and only a moustache is visible, further strengthening the link to Huvishka’s coin portrait. The connection is confirmed by the iconography of those medallions depicting Kushan rulers that have been identified as Huvishka, see Göbl 1963: 139; 1987: 196.

<sup>53</sup> One can note that in both instances three vertical ‘rows’ are detectable. The Lahore relief makes clear beyond all doubt that the first comprises the ear with earring, and the second and third the diadem ties.



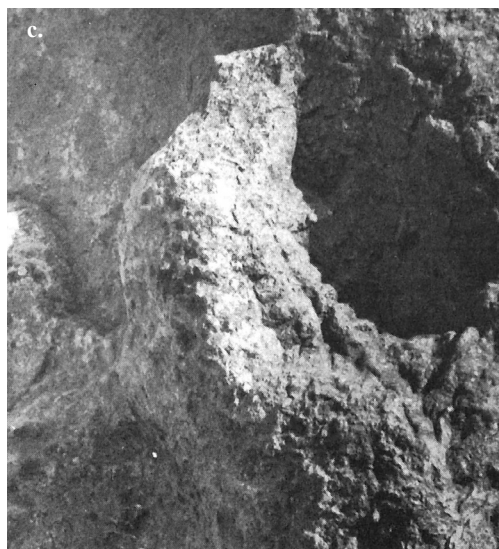


Fig. 16a-b - Stone relief and detail, Lahore Museum. After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 77.

Fig. 16c - The head of the king on the Surkh Kotal stele. After SKr: pl. 65, detail.

niscent of the imagery employed by the two Vimas, besides others that point to later stages, such as the head in three-quarter view that appears to be linked to the period of

Huvishka.<sup>54</sup> The problem is that our knowledge of Kushan royal imagery is not as broad as one might think at a first glance, and while numismatics provides a solid core that is crucial in order to establish a general framework based on primary evidence, we must realise that the full repertoire was sensibly larger than that attested by coinage. Indeed, we are faced here with an issue analogous to that affecting studies in Sasanian iconography: when materials other than coins are discussed, the basic reference features that are defined thanks to numismatics, such as the crown system that is instrumental in the attribution of any Sasanian royal image, regardless of the medium, appear at times to be subject to conventions that may even significantly differ from those considered standard.<sup>55</sup> The case that perfectly illustrates the point, *vis-à-vis* the Kushans, is that of the king on the so-called Kanishka reliquary, who wears a kind of cylindrical headgear not attested elsewhere.<sup>56</sup>

All this has a bearing not only on what is documented, but also on its chronological setting, since the appearance of a given feature in a specific moment does not automatically mean that the feature in question can only be dated to that very moment. At times we should imagine an “underlying” pool of motives, i.e. the iconographic repertoire, from which some were selected and somehow “canonised” in a certain role. In addition to considering in one way or another what may have existed outside of the “canonised” features, we should also bear in mind that what was not canonical at a given time could assume a different role in a later period, and vice versa.

All this said, with its two inscribed images of Vima Taktu and Kanishka, the best comparative evidence to identify the king on the stele comes right from the other renowned Kushan temple installation, i.e. the *devakula* of Mat. Thanks to the remains of a further pedestal inscription, we know that Huvishka was in all likelihood included in the gallery of royal portraits there (Rosenfield 1967: 146-147). Moreover, as the part of a foot similar to those of Kanishka is visible on the pedestal, it can be inferred that Huvishka was portrayed in a standing posture.

Therefore, of the three statues of Kushan kings certainly attested at Mat, one is sitting on a throne and two are standing. It can be thus stated that a common pattern appears to be shared by the two sets of royal portraits at Mat and Surkh Kotal, which included a number of kings depicted as standing accompanied by a single enthroned one.<sup>57</sup> This similarity is far from surprising, indeed, and tallies well with the idea of the existence of a

<sup>54</sup> It is worth recalling that all the frontal images portraying the enthroned king on coins depict the head in full profile, and the three-quarter view for the king's head is unknown. The obverse busts, on the other hand, do show a tendency toward the three-quarter view: while they were clearly not intended to be in profile, they also depart from a coherent frontal depiction, an impression obviously enhanced by the heads consistently seen in profile. In this connection it is to be noted that the Khalchayan medallion, which is not much larger than a double dinar, portrays the king's head in completely frontal view.

<sup>55</sup> As eminently shown, e.g., by images of Sasanian kings on metal vessels wearing crowns that are unknown on coins.

<sup>56</sup> There is no doubt that a king is depicted, and the most recent research points to an identification with Huvishka rather than with Kanishka, see Errington 2002. Clear links with Kushan royal iconography can be easily detected in the king's image (from the splayed foot to the left hand hidden in the sleeve, cf. Sinisi 2017: 898) as well as in that of the two deities at his sides. The headgear worn by the king, exhibiting a wreath all around, is singularly reminiscent of the *modius* worn by priests at Palmyra, which is often provided with an analogously placed wreath. In a Kushan context such as that of the reliquary, one is left to wonder if it may hint at a connection with the cylindrical crown of Indra.

<sup>57</sup> The monumental image (c. 1.80 m in height) of the enthroned king of Gokarneshvara Tila suggests that, if “an establishment similar to the Māt shrine” really stood there, as hypothesized by Rosenfield (1967: 142-143, 148-149), the pattern was the same.

coherent system in the outer appearance of royal images, a real programme employed across the empire and the various visual media, as we have already seen above (also cf. Sinisi 2017), and, within this framework, of specific canonised patterns that allow identifying the single figures. In the light of these considerations, it may be inferred that there was a fixed scheme which required one of the kings to be portrayed enthroned, whereas the others, all in standing pose, had to be recognised by other specific attributes, similar in concept to those identifying the divine images. In other words, if this interpretation is accepted, it ought to be expected that even the other *bagolangos* across the empire,<sup>58</sup> such as at Rabatak or Airtam (Rtveladze 2018), exhibited a set of royal images that included an enthroned ruler besides a number of standing kings.

Needless to say, identifying the single images would be of crucial importance, due to the impact on both the comprehension of the sites themselves, as the relevance for their chronology and the nature of the activities performed is obvious, and on a wider assessment of Kushan royal ideology and religion.

### The Identification

Now, on the basis of the Mat image, the enthroned king may be identified with Vima Taktu, combining the iconographic match and the epigraphic proof from the inscription on the statue from the *devakula*.

In their current state of preservation, the images of the other kings present more difficulties.<sup>59</sup> In this connection it is, first of all, necessary to stress that the set of images at Surkh Kotal appears to be incomplete. As we know from its inscription, the “gallery” of royal portraits of the *bagolango* of Rabatak included all the kings from Kujula up to the then ruling king, Kanishka,<sup>60</sup> and there is no reason to think that the practice was different at Surkh Kotal or elsewhere. Now, the SK4 inscription attests to activities carried out during the reign of Huvishka, which would imply that five royal images, from Kujula to Huvishka, had to be set in the temple complex. While in 1983 the problem may have been overlooked as the existence of two Vimas was still to be ascertained, the number of royal images originally set in the complex should be increased to six if we refer to the chronology of the phase of the site’s life associated to the main Kushan kings, which the excavators considered to have reached the reign of Vasudeva on the basis of the coin finds (SKr: 139-142).<sup>61</sup> Needless to say, this has its impact even on the assessment of the original placing of the images, considering that only four have been recovered, bearing in mind the questions on the location in which they were found.

### *The Stone Images: the Statues*

Once the king of the stele is identified with Vima I Taktu, we are faced with trying to find indications that may link the other kings from Kujula to at least Huvishka to the three surviving stone statues, or rather, to what remains of them, the only image to be

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Fussman 1998: 590; 2001: 260-261, who wrote of a real network of such temples across the whole of the empire.

<sup>59</sup> With the obvious exception of Kanishka at Mat, thanks to the inscription on the statue. Considering the practice at Mat, it is reasonable to expect that even the Surkh Kotal images were supposed to bear identifying “labels.”

<sup>60</sup> See Sims-Williams 2004 for the last edition of the Rabatak inscription.

<sup>61</sup> The pages in question were written by G. Fussman.

more substantively preserved being Statue I. In the light of this, it is important to bear in mind the “diagnostic role” of specific features that can be detected on the fragments in connection with what we know of Kushan royal iconography from other sources, the best-known of them being coins. The condition of the statues makes this task far from simple, compelling us to proceed within a largely hypothetical framework, often only by exclusion and analogy.

One of the most significant features of the royal image is certainly represented by the headgear. This makes the fragments of the heads recovered the first evidence to deal with. To begin with, it must be stressed that the fragments of three different heads were found: S1 and S1a, which are illustrated in the Surkh Kotal final publication (SKr: 120 and pl. 63, nos. 193-194),<sup>62</sup> and S22 (SKr: 121), of which unfortunately no visual documentation exists. They all seem to wear headgears that can be compared to royal tiaras,<sup>63</sup> and in combination with the material they are made of, their connection with the royal stone images appears to be certain.

### Statue I

In order to investigate the possible links with the statues, the point of departure is obviously the better-preserved image, i.e., Statue I, which was found in the spring of 1952 and illustrated for the first time shortly afterwards (Schlumberger 1952b). While no attribution to a specific king is attempted in the 1983 final publication, already in 1963 Robert Göbl had proposed to identify it with Huvishka on the basis of comparisons with coin iconography (Göbl 1963: 141-142; cf. also Göbl 1987: 196, fn. 8). In particular, the peculiar topcoat with lapels that broaden over the two round broaches visible on the chest (Fig. 17a) represents one of the “diagnostic” features provided by Kushan imagery known from coinage, and is instrumental in linking the statue to Huvishka’s numismatic portrait. While two discoidal elements, associated to either cloaks or topcoats, are visible on coins of other Kushan kings, such as Vima Kadphises and Kanishka, the peculiarly shaped lapels of the Statue I topcoat are characteristic only of Huvishka’s portrait,<sup>64</sup> as shown by gold coins of his third and fourth issues from mint A.<sup>65</sup> On these coins (Fig. 17b), there is a discernible thickening of the coat edges that renders the widening lapels visible on the statue,<sup>66</sup> in an occurrence unparalleled in the whole of Kushan coinage.

Further similarities may be found in the torque that is clearly visible at the base of the neck of Statue I,<sup>67</sup> and in the decorative motif found on the tunic, with a central band

<sup>62</sup> Head S1 was already illustrated in the second preliminary report on the excavations (see Schlumberger 1954: 167, and pl. III.4) although it was still lacking the fragment with the eye and the cheekbone, which appears only in the final publication (SKr: pl. 63, n. 193), as it was in all probability found later.

<sup>63</sup> Schlumberger explicitly wrote of tiaras for heads S1 and S1a, the term “bonnet” being in all likelihood preferred for head S22 only because the upper part of the headgear is missing.

<sup>64</sup> Göbl 1963: 136; 1987: 196, detected it also on medallions, which he could convincingly attribute to Huvishka on the basis of this and other iconographic details.

<sup>65</sup> According to Göbl 1984: pls. 16-21. In the third issue, the headgear alternates between a tiara and a “mitre,” in the fourth only the latter is attested.

<sup>66</sup> Although the segmented treatment of the lapels visible on the statue (in all likelihood meant to represent fur, cf. Göbl 1963: 136; Rosenfield 1967: 157-158; SKr: 117-118; Verardi 1983: 239) can nowhere be ascertained on the coins: either it is supposed to be engraved but is obliterated by wear, or the reduced scale of the image simply prevented the die cutter from engraving it.

<sup>67</sup> It is possible that a necklace, perhaps with a central medallion, may be what is depicted.





Fig. 17a - Surkh Kotal, Statue I, detail. After SKr: pls. 58, 183.

Fig. 17b - Huvishka, gold dinar, Roma Numismatics E-Sale 59 (11-7-19) lot 471.

lined by beads, which are evident only on coins of Huvishka.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Göbl's identification of Statue I with Huvishka can be comfortably confirmed.<sup>69</sup>

Regarding the connections of the statues with the heads found during the excavations, Schlumberger, followed by Fussman, was certain that the head to be associated to Statue I is S22 (SKr: 120-121). However, when the enquiry is broadened to include other comparative evidence, a close examination of Kushan royal iconography as attested in various instances seems to suggest otherwise, pointing instead to head S1. The latter, indeed, finds a quite significant comparison in a Gandharan relief from Ranigat depicting the distribution by the Brahmin Drona of the relics of the Buddha, now kept at the Lahore Museum (Lyons, Ingholt 1957: no. 153; Rosenfield 1967: fig. 86, and p. xxxix for the details) (Fig. 18). One of the royal recipients of the relics, the one on the far left, is portrayed as a Kushan king, recognisable by the costume and the diademed tiara (Fig. 19a). Remarkably enough, this character wears precisely the same tiara as head S1 (Fig. 19b-c).<sup>70</sup> The two tiaras exhibit the same shape, as well as common secondary features such as the garland—or wreath—wrapped around their base. Also identical are some details, such as the way in which the lower edge<sup>71</sup> of the headgear frames the face, and the ear that is left visible.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> The comparison with the coinage of Vima Kadphises is instructive, as Vima used busts on his obverses extensively. Despite the beard of the king, Vima's coins show the hem of the tunic at the neck, but nothing comparable to the torque or necklace of Huvishka's coin busts is visible. Also, Vima's tunic is always plain as, essentially, is also that of Huvishka in his first two issues (see Göbl 1984).

<sup>69</sup> In theory, as the chest of Statue II is missing, there is no way to exclude the possibility that it might also have worn a caftan with broadening lapels (cf. Fussman 1986: 170). However, this appears unlikely on the basis of the comparisons offered by royal iconography: the standing statue of Kanishka at Mat shows another type of topcoat, which appears to be identical to that worn by Vima Kadphises on his copper coins, thus confirming that the variety exhibited by these items of clothing on coins is mirrored in sculpture.

<sup>70</sup> This comparison was first drawn in Sinisi 2017: 894-895, fig. 33.

<sup>71</sup> Schlumberger considered this feature to represent the locks of hair visible from below the tiara, see SKr: 120.

<sup>72</sup> A similar rendering of the tiara is seen on the head of a royal donor, identified by F. Grenet with Huvishka, on another Gandharan relief (see Marshak, Grenet 2006: 955). The globular ending on top of the tiara closely recalls that of the tiara of the king in the Lahore Museum relief (Fig. 14a-b here). A further close



Fig. 18 - Stone relief from Ranigat, Lahore Museum. After Lyons, Ingholt 1957: no. 153.

Thus, the king in the relief wears precisely the same tiara as one of the kings portrayed at Surkh Kotal, once again highlighting, among other things, the broad diffusion of a specific set of iconographic features consistently employed in royal visual communication across the whole of the empire (cf. Sinisi 2017: 895-901).

Now, what is crucial here is that the king of the Ranigat relief has his face preserved, clearly showing a moustache and a beardless jaw and chin. When we compare his head with the royal iconography attested by coinage, the only possible match is provided by the series of Huvishka. For this purpose, three features must be singled out: contrary to Vima Kadphises and Kanishka, who are consistently fully bearded, Huvishka is never shown with a beard,<sup>73</sup> but only with a moustache or, alternatively, moustache combined with side whiskers; although in association with different headgear—apparently closer to a mitre than to a tiara<sup>74</sup>—Huvishka is the only king to be depicted with a wreath around his headgear;<sup>75</sup> the ribbing exhibited by the diadem of the Ranigat king appears on Kushan coins only under Huvishka,<sup>76</sup> whereas before that ribbons are always plain.

comparison is provided by the tiara worn by a figure believed to depict a high Kushan dignitary, whose head was found at Tapa Sardar (see Verardi 1983: 279, and figs. 32-33): a wreath/garland is wrapped around the lower bowl of the tiara and the ear is left visible. The personage has a moustache but no beard.

<sup>73</sup> Despite the reduced dimensions of the obverse portrait, where he is customarily depicted full-length, the lack of beard may be confirmed even for Vasudeva, who appears to have worn only a moustache.

<sup>74</sup> Huvishka wears tiaras in the first three of his four issues (at times substituted by the “mitre” during the third issue), see Göbl 1984: pls. 10-27. The “mitre” may well be just a more conical tiara, appearing more angular due to its profile view.

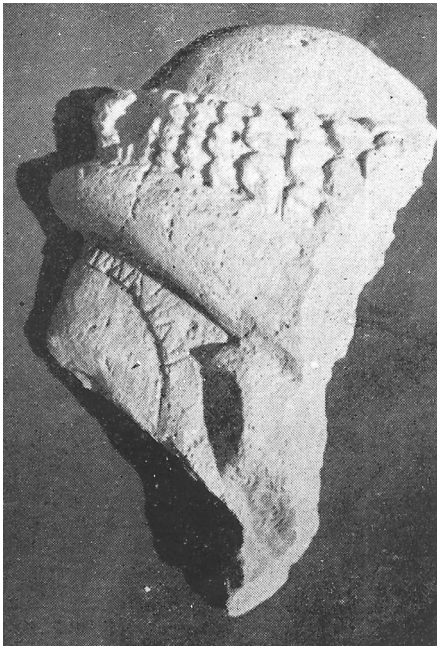
<sup>75</sup> In Huvishka’s last issue (see Göbl 1984: 34, and pl. 158, Types XVII-XIX of Huvishka). A similar wreath is found wrapped around the peculiar cylindrical headgear worn by the king of the so-called Kanishka reliquary (as noted already by Göbl 1984: 28, 34), cf. above fn. 56.

<sup>76</sup> As I already argued (Sinisi 2017: 879-881), the ribbed diadem may have been imported in the Kushan coin repertoire from other media, rather than being introduced first in coin iconography to be then adopted





a.



b.



c.

Fig. 19a - Head of the king on the Ranigat relief (Fig. 18). After Rosenfield 1967: fig. 86 (detail).

Fig. 19b - Surkh Kotal, Head S1. After Schlumberger 1954: pl. III.

Fig. 19c - Surkh Kotal, Head S1. After SKr: pl. 65.

in sculpture. Yet the fact that it appears on coins only with Huvishka seems to suggest that it had not been included in the royal iconographic repertoire long before his reign.



Therefore, my conclusion is that the royal image that inspired the artist of Ranigat was that of Huvishka. Consequently, head S1 portrays Huvishka, and it must be associated with the statue that could be already independently identified with the same king, i.e., Statue I.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, a confirmation appears to come right from head S22, which is described by Schlumberger as wearing, in addition to a moustache, a pointed beard (SKr: 121). This means that, even momentarily leaving aside head S1, if Statue I must be identified with Huvishka following Göbl, its head could not be in any case S22, as Huvishka was never fully bearded. The inference is that head S22 portrays either Vima Kadphises or Kanishka.<sup>78</sup> Now, these two kings can be considered as certainly depicted at Surkh Kotal, and one would therefore naturally associate them with Statues II and III. Hence, heads S1a and S22 would appear to be linked to these two statues, although in these instances there is no way to propose any hypothesis on how to combine heads and statues.

### Statues II and III

Concerning the issue of identification, Statues II and III provide no evidence comparable to that found on Statue I. However, one feature that sets them apart is still detectable in the clothing that can be made out on the two sculptures thanks to the preservation of their rear sides: while Statue II (Fig. 20b) seems to exhibit a topcoat similar to that worn by Statue I (Fig. 20a), as evidenced by the characteristic V-shaped pleats,<sup>79</sup> Statue III (Fig. 20c) clearly wears a cloak, as unmistakably indicated by the huge vertical folds that reach the edge of the pedestal on the rear.<sup>80</sup> Now, on coins cloaks appear in the images of several kings,<sup>81</sup> but the only one to conspicuously and consistently display a cloak associated with a standing portrait is Kanishka. Therefore, one is left to wonder if Statue III may indeed depict Kanishka, although it must be said that at Mat he clearly wears a topcoat without any hint of a cloak.

As problematic as it may be, this hypothesis would translate in identifying Statue II with Vima Kadphises, which fits the coin image of this king as it appears in particular on the copper series, where Vima is portrayed standing with a topcoat or caftan over a tunic.

While the hypothetical character of these proposals must be stressed, the identification with Kujula for either statue can be comfortably excluded, as no single feature linking them to the image of this king is attested.<sup>82</sup>

### Were There Other Statues?

Therefore, the image of Kujula appears to have completely disappeared, and the same may hold true of that of Vasudeva, too. This has a direct impact on the question of the

<sup>77</sup> An analogous hypothesis was already proposed by Göbl 1984: 15 with similar arguments (but without the comparison provided by the Ranigat relief), and vigorously criticized by Fussman 1986: 170.

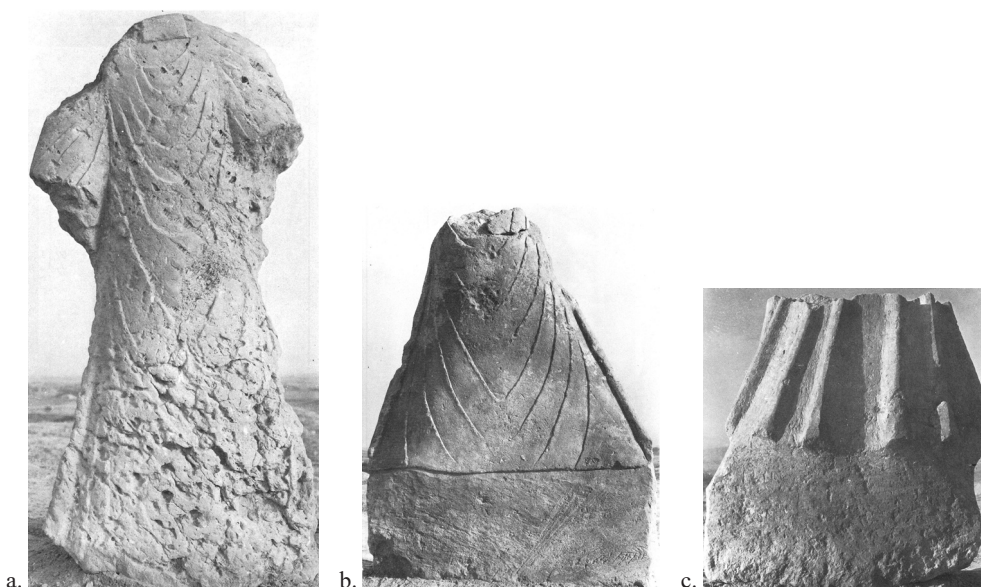
<sup>78</sup> While we move in the realm of the hypothetical here, royal iconography as we know it from coinage would exclude that the bearded head S22 could refer to Kujula or Vasudeva.

<sup>79</sup> When compared with the roundish rendering on Statue I, the pleats appear more angular on Statue II. Yet this might be linked to the fact that on the latter statue the only preserved part is the lower one, which is heavily worn on Statue I.

<sup>80</sup> The possibility that this feature may be due to the fact that Statue III was not finished (SKr: 119) seems to be excluded by the comparison with the other two statues. Moreover, if Statue I portrays Huvishka, then Statue III should depict one of his predecessors and thus be, at least in theory, earlier.

<sup>81</sup> Vima Kadphises, Huvishka, Kanishka.

<sup>82</sup> The same holds true for Vasudeva.



Figs. 20a-c - Surkh Kotal, backside of Statue I (after SKr: pl. 58.182); Statue II (*ibid.*: pl. 61.186); Statue III (*ibid.*: pl. 62.190).

original placing of the royal images in the temple complex,<sup>83</sup> since it is plain to see that the proposal of the excavators, which was based on the relationship between the pedestals of the statues and the associated floor, is not compatible with the existence of other images in addition to the four known ones. Indeed, it would be better to say that the reconstruction of the excavators is *further* challenged by the possibility that other images had originally existed, in addition to several other arguments that make it unlikely. Indeed, that the placing of the images during the Kushan phase of the site's life cannot be that in which they were recovered by the excavations, is the first point on which Luca M. Olivieri and I discovered to agree when we started to exchange our views on the topic. He has presented his views in the other section of this note, clearly showing that the stratigraphic evidence does not support the idea that the floor of the so-called chapel on which the statues stood at the SE corner of the *peribolos* can be associated to the first phase of the site's life.

In my opinion, an analysis of the layout of the structures on the top terrace, in particular of the relationship between Temple A and the precinct, is alone more than enough to exclude that the images could have been originally placed where they were found. The idea that the three statues could be simply lined at the SE corner, faced by the stele on the opposite side, contrasts too heavily with the concept behind the spatial arrangement of the *peribolos* and the temple at its centre. The very grouping of the statues is striking for its crude appearance, which is hard to reconcile with a huge project of visual display involving the ruling dynasty such as that of a site like Surkh Kotal.

The probable existence of other images that have gone missing can be added to the observations of Luca M. Olivieri and to the considerations on the general layout of the

<sup>83</sup> It is to be noted that this would not change if the identification of the images proposed here should be proven not correct: by the time of Huvishka five images had to be in any case set up in the *bagolango*, and only four of them have been found.

structures of the top terrace to reject the idea that in Kushan times the stele and the three statues could have been kept inside open chapels located where the images have been found. Indeed, the plan of the top terrace during the first phase of life of the sanctuary leaves few doubts that the royal images had their original seat under the portico of the *peribolos* surrounding Temple A.

### *The Celebratory Visual Programme*

In this connection it is worth devoting some considerations to the inclusion of royal images in these temple complexes. While every king was supposed to add his own image to those of his predecessors, the founder of a sanctuary such as that of Surkh Kotal found himself in the position of building the whole complex with several royal images to set up. In practical terms the architects of Kanishka, to whom the foundation of Surkh Kotal as we know it from the excavations can be surely ascribed,<sup>84</sup> built the *bagolango* with the provision that it had to include *four* royal images as a start,<sup>85</sup> i.e. Kanishka and his three predecessors in the dynasty, exactly as witnessed by the Rabatak inscription for the relevant *bagolango*. Thus, at its inauguration the Surkh Kotal *bagolango* already exhibited the images of the four kings from Kujula to Kanishka. It is intuitive that the plan of the structure, with particular reference to where these royal images were supposed to be placed, had to foresee the addition of the images of the successor(s) of Kanishka, such as that of Huvishka which has fortunately survived to reach us. Needless to say, this had to occur in coherence with the general principles that governed the spatial layout of the temple complex. With the scale of the structures on the top terrace in mind, it appears hard to believe that the place designed by Kanishka's architects for a number of royal images that in due time was expected to grow, may have been the alleged chapels at the two corners of the *peribolos*.

When we look at the four Surkh Kotal images from the point of view of their style, the picture presents some open questions. Statues II and III appear, for what is left of

<sup>84</sup> The above-mentioned inscription on the broken pedestal of a statue from Mat has been interpreted as mentioning the *devakula* "of the grandfather of the Mahārāja Rājātīrāja Devaputra Huvishka" (Rosenfield 1967: 147), which would correspond to Vima Kadphises, assuming that Huvishka was the son of Kanishka. The inference would be that the *devakula* might have been founded by Vima Kadphises. Yet Lüders (1961: 138-145) was somewhat more cautious in explicitly linking the temple with the grandfather of Huvishka, and Fussman (1998: 613) ascribed its construction, in addition to those of Surkh Kotal and Rabatak, to Kanishka. P. Bernard (2001: 302-304) has returned on the question, highlighting the possible pre-Kanishkan stages of Surkh Kotal, in connection with the date of 279 of inscription SK 2, which would point to the reign of Vima Taktu. Needless to say, we should consider all the possible scenarios (including that, e.g., the two inscriptions bearing the year 279—SK 2 and that of the Dasht-e Nawur—might not be dated in the same era, as unlikely as this hypothesis may be). Yet, there are a few problems. First, if the year 279 is taken to have fallen during Vima Taktu's reign, this alleged pre-Kanishka phase would have covered *at least* the whole of Vima Kadphises' years of rule, i.e. possibly a couple of decades. It must be stressed that of such a phase of the temple complex, which—it must be remembered—was expressly called Kanishka-Oanindo, not Vima-Oanindo, nothing remains. Moreover, what could have been on the top terrace before the construction of the *peribolos* with temple A, which appear to belong to a single building project, should be assumed to have *completely* escaped the excavators' attention. Finally, together with the architecture of this "édifice sacré pré-kanishkéen," we should presume that further royal images were lost, namely that of Kujula and those of either both the Vimas or of Vima Kadphises alone, if the stele is considered to have been carved under Vima Taktu and taken to represent the only evidence survived of the whole pre-Kanishka phase of the temple, together with only three stone blocks (two of them bearing the SK 2 and SK 3 inscriptions). Perhaps it would be reasonable to abandon the idea that these temple complexes were built by a single king and accept that, for instance, the *devakula* of Mat could have been founded by Vima Taktu and the *bagolango* of Surkh Kotal, like that of Rabatak, by Kanishka.

<sup>85</sup> Kujula, Vima I, Vima II and Kanishka himself.

them, practically identical. Huvishka's portrait, i.e. Statue I, which should be roughly twenty-five years later than that of Kanishka—assuming that the latter was portrayed by either Statue III or II and that the *bagolango* of Surkh Kotal was built in the early years of Kanishka,<sup>86</sup> as that of Rabatak—exhibits the same treatment of drapery as that found on Statue II, with the angular, almost V-shaped pleats. On the other hand, one has the impression that the sculpting of head S1 is more refined than that of head S1a, with its somewhat coarser rendering of the hair coming out of the rear of the royal tiara. Needless to say, in the latter instances a full appraisal is hindered by the limits of the evidence, especially in the case of head S1a.<sup>87</sup> In addition to all this, the three-quarters view of the head of the king of the stele, which should be dated to the reign of Kanishka, contrasts with the solutions that one would expect from that early period on the basis of the other coeval evidence, namely coinage, and it appears to be linked to the time of Huvishka based on the comparisons provided by the Gandharan reliefs.

In a way, these terms perfectly illuminate the problem, as we are referring on the one hand to coin comparisons and on the other to sculptural ones. The point is that we should try to develop an understanding of Kushan official art without flattening our hypotheses on a mere “bidimensional” view, i.e. a mechanical approach that, bypassing the problematic aspects, runs the risk of hindering a full comprehension of the phenomenon in its real depth. The definition of a canon of Kushan imperial iconography is, according to the evidence provided by coinage, due to Vima Kadphises. Indeed, several features of the images that we are discussing, including a few apparently minor ones, are already detectable on his coins. Thus, the V-shaped pleats visible, for example, on the breast of Statue I, are found in the same place in the standing image of Vima Kadphises on his copper coins, and from then onwards appear on coins of Kanishka as well as on those of Huvishka; the way in which the topcoat folds back at the front on the statue of Kanishka at Mat is directly taken from the same copper coins of his father; even the splayed foot appeared first with Vima Kadphises. So, we are faced with the problem, even in chronological terms, of the relationship between the prototype, i.e. the design of the image or of the single iconographic pattern, be it of major or minor importance, and its employment by the artist(s) in different media, each with its own set of conventions. Concerning the stele, for example, the mix of features that we can define as early (e.g., the enthroned king image, the topcoat falling on the king's legs) and later (the three-quarter view of the head) may be the result of an earlier occurrence of formulae so far unattested under the first Kushans or, alternatively, of the survival of specific early patterns in a later stage. Both hypotheses have their consequences, but the second one would imply that the image of Vima Taktu on the stele could have been effectively carved under Huvishka. Indeed, although in the present state of knowledge of Kushan royal art and of the life of the Surkh Kotal *bagolango* we can only propose alternative scenarios, it may well be possible that the restoration works attested by SK 4 could have involved some of the images, either royal or divine, which may have suffered some kind of damage.<sup>88</sup> Hence the stele por-

<sup>86</sup> This remains, of course, a mere (working) hypothesis, essentially based on the parallel of Rabatak. However, it has to be stressed that a series of events following the construction of the temple, i.e. those essentially reported by SK4, had to occur between the inauguration of the temple and year 31, when Nokonzoko supervised the restoration works, so the relevant timeframe cannot be too short.

<sup>87</sup> The less refined treatment of head S1a may be due to the fact that the rear side was not supposed to be in full sight.

<sup>88</sup> Or may simply have not returned in full after a possible transfer to another location, such as that mentioned by the inscription, *if* it refers also to royal images.



traying Vima Taktu could date to the early reign of Huvishka rather than to that of Kanishka, mixing specific features that canonically identified Vima Taktu with stylistic updates originating in the artistic milieu of Huvishka's time.

### *The Placing of the Royal Images and the Aftermath*

There are of course other considerations that can be made in trying to study the royal images in their context. These images had to be set in the *bagolango*, at Surkh Kotal as elsewhere, according to some kind of pre-determined spatial order, i.e. a pattern that could only be imagined as connected to the dynastic succession of the rulers. Hence, when Surkh Kotal was built, the sequence of the images—whatever its arrangement may have been, i.e. from left to right or the opposite, or else—in all likelihood started with Kujula and ended with Kanishka, the stele portraying Vima I occupying the second place. The direction to be followed in the gallery of portraits may also have been tied to the prescriptions that were supposed to be observed in paying homage to the kings' images, assuming—as a mere hypothesis—that the images were objects of some sort of specific attention by the visitors of the *bagolango*. We know nothing about it, and a possible difference between various types of visitors should be also taken into account, as ceremonies involving the upper levels of the Kushan authorities or the court may have sensibly differed from usual activities, especially with regard to the images of the king's ancestors.

The nature of all the issues raised here changed with the phases in the site's life, starting with the end of the first period of Temple A, connected to the Kushans, which covered the two stages running from the beginnings to the first crisis, and from Nokonzoko's restorations under Huvishka to the end of the properly Kushan phase of the site's life. The latter was dated by the excavators to Vasudeva.

Following the hiatus that the French archaeologists linked to the “deuxième abandon du site,” activity at Surkh Kotal was resumed with the construction of the ensemble centred on Temple B, a fire-temple according to all scholars,<sup>89</sup> and as such to be associated with the Sasanians. In the light of this, the chronology of the transfer of the images from their original place to their final location, i.e. where the excavations have found them, can only be moved sensibly forward, as it is to be excluded that the operation was handled by Sasanian authorities. Moreover, it is rather hard to believe that the transfer could take place in a phase in which the focus of the site's life had shifted away from its original seat, as Temple A was no longer in activity, and largely outside the precinct. Since the final setting of the images presupposes a main axis centred on Temple A,<sup>90</sup> it is extremely unlikely that the images could stand there during the phase in which Temple B was functional, not to mention that it is difficult to imagine a reason why the Sasanian Kushanshahs should have kept on display in a prominent role the images of the kings of the Kushan dynasty, which was overthrown by the Sasanians. Actually, Temple B and its indisputable connection to the Sasanian rule in Bactria would lead to dating the placement of the images in their final location to no earlier than the end of the Sasanian period, that is to say, *after* the Sasanians.

In the new context of the Sasanian rule, Surkh Kotal was, “technically” speaking, no longer functioning as a *bagolango*, and the Kushan royal images, playing no part in the activities performed in the fire-temple, completely lost the role that they had in the previous period.

<sup>89</sup> Starting with Schlumberger and Fussman themselves, see SKr: 145-146.

<sup>90</sup> In the stage defined by the excavators as A1.

The Temple B ensemble came to an end due to a great fire. Considering that no significant effort was made to resurrect it, one is left to wonder about the possible links with the political events in Bactria connected to the beginning of the Huna period. At any rate, it appears that it was at a given moment (which is not possible to specify better) in this long post-Sasanian phase that Surkh Kotal was involved in a new project, albeit, as is evident from the history of the site, on a much smaller scale in comparison to what it had seen before. The ancient main temple had a new phase, i.e. A1, in which it was again the focus of activities, and in this framework the old stone images were transferred to their final location, gaining a new centrality. In what role they lived this second life is destined, at least for the time being, to remain unclear. Certainly, they were considered venerable objects, but it is legitimate to wonder whom the visitors to the top terrace in this late stage of the site's life may have seen in those images. Were they still identified as Kushans, and thus recovered from the ruined *peribolos* to be put on display precisely for that reason? Or were they simply the "kings of the past?" Or were they kings at all?

In this context, the notable absentee is the subject of the activities performed in Temple A1, of which we know nothing, as it could somehow help us in understanding if the site had retrieved something, in a new and in any case reduced framework, of its ancient function of *bagolango*. Surely, the cultural horizon differed. The site had already experienced a major change in this regard with the transition from the Kushan to the Sasanian period, with its impact on the ideological and religious settings of the temples intimately connected to the dynasty such as the *bagolangos*. Of the religion(s), with the strictly connected notions of royal ideology, of the new groups arrived on the scene in the Huna period we still know little, and to what extent in the long run they may have engaged with this heritage remains object of future studies.

F.S.

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